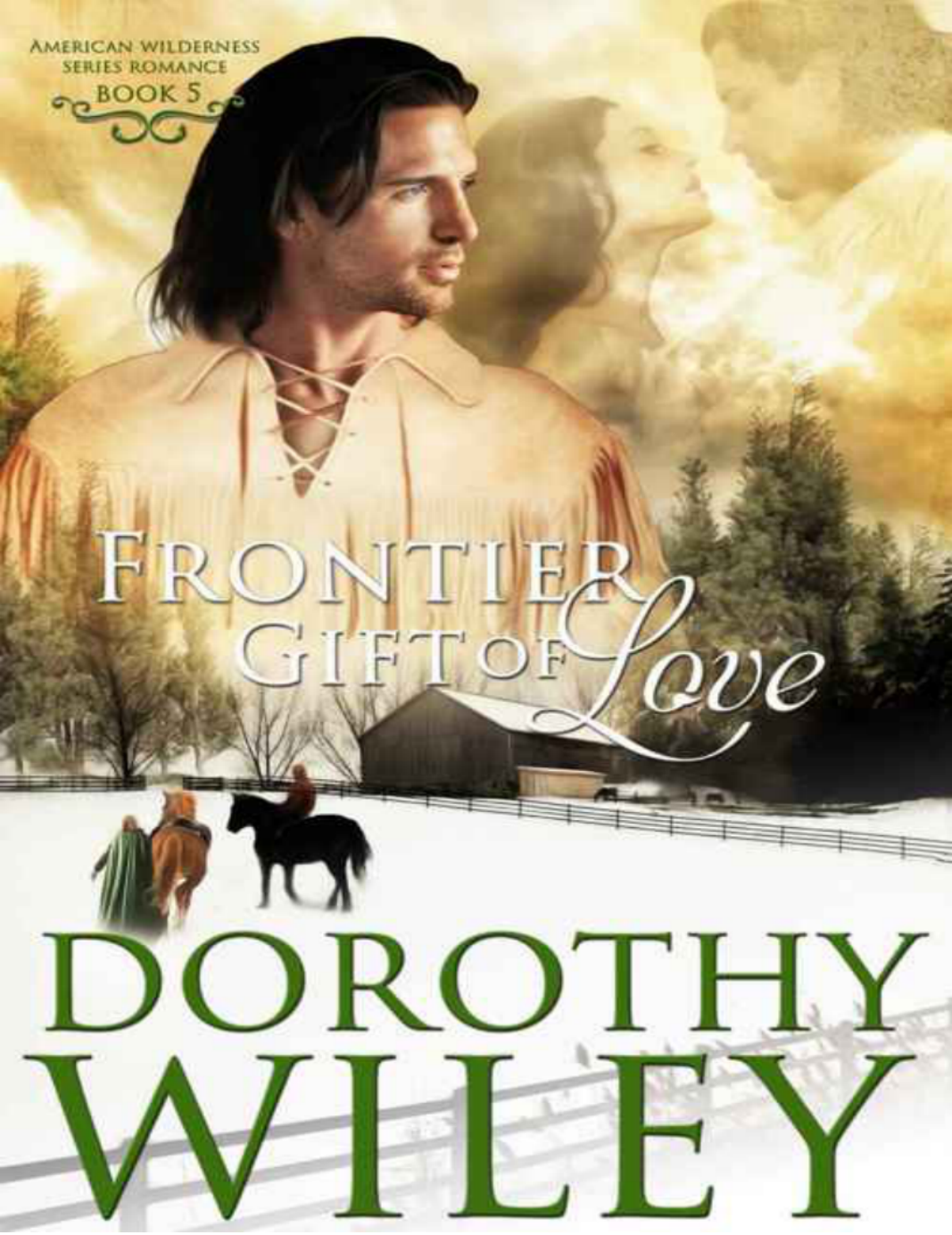

AMERICAN WILDERNESS
SERIES ROMANCE
BOOK 5
FRONTIER
GIFT OF Love
DOROTHY
WILEY

FRONTIER GIFT OF LOVE

Dedication

To my dear daughter-in-law

August Wiley

one of the strongest women I know.

Thank you for taking the journey of love with our family.

FRONTIER GIFT OF LOVE

BOOK FIVE

AMERICAN WILDERNESS SERIES ROMANCE

DOROTHY WILEY

Frontier Gift of Love

Dorothy Wiley

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Frontier Gift of Love is a fictional novel inspired by history, rather than a precise account of history. Except for historically prominent personages, the characters are fictional and names, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. Each book in the series can be read independently. For the sake of understanding, the author used language for her characters for the modern reader rather than strictly reflecting the far more formal speech and writing patterns of the 18th-century.

Other Titles by Dorothy Wiley

WILDERNESS TRAIL OF LOVE

NEW FRONTIER OF LOVE

WHISPERING HILLS OF LOVE

FRONTIER HIGHLANDER VOW OF LOVE

If ever two were one, then surely we.

If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;

If ever wife was happy in a man,

Compare with me, ye women, if you can.

I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold

Or all the riches that the East doth hold.

My love is such that rivers cannot quench,

Nor ought but love from thee, give recompense.

Thy love is such I can no way repay,

The heavens reward thee manifold I pray.

Then while we live, in love let's so persevere

That when we live no more, we may live ever.

Anne Bradstreet
Circa 1641-1643

First female writer in the British North American colonies to be published.

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Prologue

Cumberland Falls Horse Farm, Kentucky,

Early Monday, 19 December, 1799

Sam Wyllie always faced life's dangers head on—but this was different—now danger faced *him* head on.

Deep in thought, he strode away from their bedroom, leaving Catherine to rest for a few minutes before he would check on her again. He wished the midwife would show up soon. However, the contrary woman wasn't due to arrive for a few more hours. And their baby seemed anxious to make its arrival. Their first child wasn't due for a couple of weeks, yet Catherine first mentioned a discomfort in her side a week or so ago. That's when he sent word with one of his hands that the local midwife needed to come at once.

She arrived that same day and after spending but a few minutes with his wife, announced that the ache was nothing to worry about, and then she left straightaway despite his protests.

But the pain came back. Several times.

What could be causing her to hurt in that upper right side? Was it related to the pregnancy or not? Catherine would wince when it happened and put her hand on her right rib cage. The dull ache would usually last for a few minutes and then ease. Sometimes it lingered for hours, as it did now.

He exhaled sharply and a tight knot formed in his stomach. Worry would be the death of him before this baby arrived.

He could endure anything as long as it wasn't the death of his beloved Catherine. He needed her love more than anything in this world. Without it, he would surely die himself. His heart rose in protest at the thought, but his mind would not cease worrying.

Childbirth always posed risks, especially on the frontier. Moreover, his wife's labor might be even more dangerous. Catherine's

first pregnancy did not go well. Would this one be the same?

He would fight the devil himself to hell and back to defend Catherine, but this was one danger from which he could not shield her. Gritting his jaw, he vowed he would try to protect her anyway.

He'd heard Jane, his youngest brother's wife, and other womenfolk talk about the terrible pains of childbirth—the sharp contractions that tightened the mother's protruding abdomen and grew progressively worse. However, the pains Catherine experienced lately seemed different.

He wished he could do more for her. The nearest doctor was at Fort Boonesborough. And then only every other week. Boonesborough was nearly a hundred miles to the north. He could reach it in two days, but he had no way of knowing whether the doc would be in town or gone for a week. And he didn't want to leave Catherine and Little John alone all that time. Besides, doctors usually deferred to mid-wives when it came to birthing babies.

Perhaps he was just being a jittery first-time father. Women gave birth all the time with no problems. He took a deep steadying breath and resolved to stay calm. At least for now.

"Little John," Sam said addressing his adopted son. "What are you reading?" The eight-year old lay sprawled out on the rug in front of their massive stone hearth in the spacious front room.

"The letter from Uncle Bear."

"We already read that letter several times, son."

"I know, but every time I read it, I get happier and happier."

Sam sat down across from Little John on an oversized chair that accommodated his sizable frame. Excited was an understatement. "You're excited about them coming for Christmas aren't you?" The boy had talked about it nearly nonstop since his ranch manager picked the letter up along with their other supplies at Fort Logan a week ago.

"Bear's bringing his new wife Artis with him. I just knew he would find a wife. He says she's a bonny lass and that I will like her more than I like apple pie."

That was saying a lot. Like Bear, the boy loved pies of all kinds, but especially apple. "I'm sure you will. Artis must be someone special

for Bear to have found her and fallen in love so quickly."

"And Uncle William and Aunt Kelly and their little girl are all coming with Bear too! And, Bear says here," Little John said, pointing to the words written in his uncle's fine hand, "that he is bringing me *three* presents—one because he had to leave us to go find a wife, another for my last birthday, and one more for Christmas!"

"Don't blame you a bit for being excited. I know how you love presents," Sam replied. For himself, he wished for only one Christmas gift—that his wife and their babe would be safe and well after childbirth.

"The best present I ever got, in my *whole* life, was the rifle you gave me for my birthday."

Sam smiled, remembering when he received his own first rifle at the same age. A tough world forced boys to prepare for manhood much too early. Little John quickly learned how to shoot the undersized rifle quite well and was now capable of hunting small game on his own. He'd given the boy a little knife two years ago and Little John could now skin a rabbit almost as fast as he could.

"If your Uncle Stephen and his family come too, we'll have a sizeable family reunion," Sam said. It made him even more thankful that he recently managed to hire a cook and a housekeeper, both of whom were unmarried and in need of employment and a roof over their heads. Their new home was just too large for Catherine to keep up with and have any time or energy left over for him and Little John. And he wanted her to enjoy spending time with the boy. She also needed time to be Little John's primary tutor, and ensure that their son received an excellent education, until he was old enough to attend a private academy.

Little John's own mother had died after a difficult childbirth. Sam shook his head as he recalled the lovely young woman's funeral and his brother John's long-lasting grief. The gloomy gray shadows of worry invaded his mind once again. He hated those oppressive thoughts. They made it difficult to think clearly and made his heart beat uncomfortably.

Focus on Little John, he told himself. After the boy also lost his father two years ago, the child needed plenty of love and attention. Sam swallowed the lump in his throat. He would never get over the loss of his brother in that horrific battle with the buffalo hunters. Although he and his other brothers finally defeated their enemy, it

came at great cost.

Trying to clear his head of the awful images, Sam closed his eyes and inhaled the savory aromas coming from the kitchen. That was another benefit of hiring the cook. Mrs. Wrigley's meals certainly earned high marks from him. Since her arrival, he'd gained back almost all the weight he'd lost eating Catherine's dreadful cooking for the last two years. Although Catherine was the love of his life, cooking was not one of her strengths.

The cook stayed constantly busy in the kitchen, preparing hearty meals for the family, the housekeeper, and the four hired hands. Sam found the smell of the hearty stew simmering and fresh bread baking quite comforting. And as fond as the widowed cook was of Little John, there would likely be a delicious apple pie cooling on the kitchen countertop.

"I can't wait to see Martha and Polly again too!" Little John said, his big blue eyes peeking up through the blond hair that now hung a little too long on his forehead. Every day, he's looking more like his father, Sam thought. He'll be tall and lean too, like John was. And the young lad seemed to exhibit the same keen mind and strength of character.

Always a bit of a loner himself, it surprised Sam that he couldn't wait to see them all again either. He had to admit he was nearly as excited as Little John. Every time they saw Stephen and Jane's two pretty girls they appeared taller, but the couple's new son, Samuel, seemed to grow right before his eyes. Named in honor of the child's grandfather Samuel, the boy was Stephen's pride and joy. And Sam wanted to hear all about Stephen's thriving herd of cattle.

And seeing William and Kelly's little girl, nearly two now, would be a special treat. When the three visited last spring, Catherine and he both thought Nicole was the prettiest little girl they'd ever laid eyes upon.

But Sam was most excited about meeting the newest family member, Bear's new wife, Artis. Like Bear, she'd grown up in Scotland. His adopted brother's letter had hinted that sad events troubled the woman's past, yet offered no further explanation. Whatever it was, he was certain Bear would have helped her through it. Bear's heart was nearly as big as he was, and that was saying something.

He missed Bear. Devoted to his entire family, his brother spent

more than a year helping Sam build this house before leaving a few months ago in search of his own future. He glanced up at the mantel above the blazing and crackling fire. Bear's talent with woodworking and exceptionally strong arms had built the stunning adornment for the large hearth.

He hoped that later in the month, they could all gather around a warm fire in happiness to celebrate Christ's birth and the safe arrival of his own child. Son or daughter, it would be the greatest gift he could ever imagine receiving. If only Catherine could give birth without difficulty.

Too restless to sit, he stood and paced before the hearth, another worry grating against his mind. Would his family all arrive safely? No trip through the wilderness was without risk. And traveling in December could be perilous in itself. In spite of the dangers, he and his brothers always tried to gather together for the holidays. There was something about a Christmas gathering that made being with family special—as though a kind of magic filled the air that brought their hearts closer to one another. It was the one time of the year when they could put aside, if only for a little while, the harsh realities of life. Life on the frontier demanded constant vigilance. But at Christmas, they all seemed to feel a reprieve—if only for a few days.

Little John glanced up. "Should I go read Bear's letter to mother again too?"

"No, let's let her rest for now…" Sam stopped speaking at the sound of horses galloping. He peered out through the front window panes and felt Little John's small hand rest against his back as the boy joined him and looked out as well.

He didn't recognize the three armed men riding toward the house. They were already too close. In the wilderness, men understood that they should not come near a man's house until bid to do so. And never at a gallop. The polite thing to do was to call out, announce yourself, and ask permission to approach.

He snatched up his heavy woolen coat, threw it on, and grabbed his loaded Kentucky rifle and pistols. As usual, his long knife hung from his belt.

"Load your rifle," he told Little John. "Then sneak out the back door and quietly warn Garvin and the other men that we have visitors —strangers. When you finish, come back inside through the back door, and wait here. You need to guard your mother."

“Yes, Pa.”

Sam loved to hear the boy call him Pa. In truth, he considered Little John his son. He patted the boy’s shoulder and turned toward the door.

Sam’s hand froze on the door handle when he heard one of the horseback men call out another name—a name from another time and another place—a name he hated.

“Bloody Hand! Come out!”

Chapter 1

Catherine woke, her right hand still resting on the spot that pained her frequently. Thankfully, the annoying ache was no longer there.

Lately, being with child made her so tired that by mid-morning she needed a short nap. But it was past time she got up. A lengthy list of projects required her attention. She arose from the bed and tidied it, brushed and styled her hair, and smoothed out her gown in front of her long mirror, thinking about all the things that needed doing. Catherine wanted to get ready for the arrival of all of their relatives for Christmas. She needed to plan meals with the cook and make the house as festive as possible.

She also wanted to sew some baby clothes, such as they were. The poor darling would likely be the worst dressed child in Kentucky based on how the last few pieces turned out. Perhaps hiring a seamstress from the fort would be a good idea. She would not have her child looking less than grand. Grimacing as she picked up the baby bonnet she recently finished, she chuckled. There was no denying she lacked both sewing and cooking skills, but hoped she made up for it by how much she loved Sam. And Little John.

Before setting out from Boston with her first husband to inspect his Kentucky land grant, she possessed few skills in basic homemaking. She had never even made a cup of coffee. In her comfortable upper-class home in Boston, domestic servants carried out most of the household duties.

Completely untrained in the domestic arts, when she and Sam moved into their new house, she made a complete fool of herself. The first time she tried to mop a floor, she slipped and fell more times than she could count, ruining her gown and silk slippers, before Sam finally told her she had put way too much soap in the water. When she tried to wash clothes, she accidentally made the fire under the wash kettle too big and both the clothes and the kettle caught fire. But worst of all, she had offered to help Sam one day when he and Bear were building the barn. When she asked what needed to be done, he told her the garden he'd planted behind the house needed weeding. In her

astonishingly ignorant state, she pulled up all the vegetables that had just sprouted. When Sam and Bear finished laughing, they had patiently replanted everything.

Growing up in a house full of servants as she did, made it truly challenging for her here on the frontier, as she learned to do the many things needed to be a wife and mother. Living in Kentucky forced her to learn new skills to just survive—including using plants and herbs for medicine, shooting a pistol and a long rifle, and growing her own vegetables and fruit.

But survive she did. Thrived even, and she had never been happier. The love she'd found with Sam was exactly what she needed to find happiness.

Ever since their first chance meeting after her husband's death on the Wilderness Trail, she'd been drawn to Sam. Initially, his tall muscled form, broad chest, and sun-bronzed face attracted her, but it was his enigmatic temperament that stirred something deep down that she never felt before. And his harsh masculinity, even his strong scarred jaw, and buckskin clothing had charmed her. He was so unlike the pompous dandies she'd known in Boston. His indigo blue eyes reflected the steel in his character. But behind his rugged warrior façade, she soon realized he possessed a kind heart and a keen well-educated mind.

She loved living here in Kentucky with Sam. Their new home was nestled in a virgin paradise. She was determined to learn all she needed to know about running a home, including caring for the babe they were expecting soon. That thought *was* daunting, and Catherine worried about whether or not she would know what to do. When she told Mrs. Wrigley about her concern, the cook reassured her that caring for infants was actually quite simple—you just needed to keep them warm, fed, and clean.

How hard could that be? She could do it.

As Catherine passed Miss Henk, bent down on her knees scrubbing the hall floor, gratitude for both the young woman's help and Sam's wisdom in hiring the housekeeper filled her. He was a patient man, but when he reached his limit of burnt meals and scorched clothing, he insisted that they hire both a cook and a housekeeper. After the young woman rode up on a tired old mule one day, looking for work, Miss Henk explained that her mother had just died and her father had passed away the previous winter. She lived in

the nearby hamlet, but her home was little more than a one-room shack in the woods. She was hungry and promised to work hard to earn her keep. The homely looking woman was proving to be a hard worker who possessed a tranquil nature.

"Thank you Miss Henk for keeping the floors looking so splendid," Catherine told her.

"You're most welcome, Mrs. Wyllie," she said, looking up. "I will not abide a dirty house. My dear departed mother taught me that. We didn't have much of a home, but it was always clean and neat. If we were meant to live in filth, we could live with the animals in the barnyard."

Catherine chuckled. "I do enjoy your humor as well as my clean floors and home, Miss Henk. Do you know where my husband is? And Little John?"

"No, I just came from scrubbing the floors in Little John's room. My face has been but a foot from floorboards for the last hour or so. Do you want me to find them for you?"

"No, thank you, I will find them myself. I just wanted to let Sam know I was feeling better."

"Glad I am to hear it, Mrs. Wyllie."

With a smile at the housekeeper, Catherine picked up her skirt and carefully tip-toed across the wet floor, making certain she didn't fall. She headed down the hall toward the large living area at the front of the house. When Sam designed their two-story log home, he combined the traditional drawing room, parlor, and dining room into one enormous space so there would be plenty of room for his family to gather there. Large pine beams across the ceiling supported the six upstairs rooms for guests and future children. Little John was excited about moving his room upstairs when the baby was born so that its crying would not awaken him at night.

Not finding anyone there, she proceeded to the kitchen at the back of the house. The large room was always a busy work space that held various aromas of cooking foods and the odors of fats, soot, and smoke. Two oil lamps and a shallow-arched window that Mrs. Wrigley could open in the summer lit the low-ceilinged space. On the kitchen's back wall, made of thick brick, stood a twelve-foot wide hearth. Utensils as well as dry preserved vegetables hung off the huge timber beam that served as the hearth's lintel.

To prepare the dried vegetables for eating, Mrs. Wrigley soaked them in water for a while. Sam called beans prepared in this way ‘leather britches’ because of their toughness after drying. Dried fruits, pumpkin, squash, and other foods could last for months at a time. Whatever food they had, they produced themselves. Here there were no big food or meat markets to buy from as there were in Boston.

To the right of the hearth, was their baking oven, built chest-high into the brick wall with a brick-domed interior. It was a wondrous addition to the kitchen. It took Sam nearly a month to build, but the crusty bread the oven produced made all his efforts well worth it.

A flight of wooden steps to the left led to the upstairs bedrooms, and just below the stairs Mrs. Wrigley and Miss Henk’s shared quarters. If they were blessed with several children in the coming years, the sound of their feet stomping down those steps on their way to breakfast or dinner might fill that room, Catherine mused.

Catherine greatly admired her cook. She considered Mrs. Wrigley a bit of a magician who ably conjured the most delightful foodstuffs from both simple and imaginative ingredients. She often used mortars and pestles to grind dozens of different spices. How the woman knew exactly what to use on what foods often baffled her. And since Catherine was a thousand miles from her own mother, Mrs. Wrigley was a most valuable and trusted source of motherly advice.

“Mrs. Wrigley, have you seen my husband and son?” she asked.

The plump curvaceous woman turned away from peeling a sizable mound of potatoes. “No, my dear lady, I haven’t seen them, but I heard one go out the front and one go out the back just a few moments ago. However, I don’t know which one went which way.”

“Thank you. By the way, your bread smells heavenly.”

“Tear yourself off a piece. A woman in your condition cannot eat enough. You must feed the babe and you.”

Catherine smiled and nodded. Indeed, her appetite seemed to grow with each passing day. Lately, her stomach growled with hunger far more often than not. She tore off a hunk of the crusty bread. It was still warm in the center and she savored the fresh aroma the steam gave off before she took a bite. “Ummm, wonderful.”

She opened the rear door, as she chewed and stepped outside, still looking for her husband and son. The rear walkways led to the

smokehouse, the dairy, water well, granary, chicken coup, a large food cellar built into the earth, and furthest away—the privy. The entire area appeared deserted. The two must still be at the horse pens or barn.

A rifle shot suddenly rang out from the front of the house. Catherine's heart skipped a beat, and she dropped the bread. Lifting her skirt, she dashed through the kitchen, down the hall, and into the front living area. Mrs. Wrigley and Miss Henk followed close behind her and the three peered outside.

Sam appeared to be fine, thank God. However, a man lay face down in the snow. Who was he? And who were the other two horseback men staring at Sam?

"Miss Henk, fetch my heavy cloak," Catherine instructed. "Please hurry."

The housekeeper rushed toward Catherine's coat closet.

"You do not need to be going out there in the freezing cold," Mrs. Wrigley cautioned. "Captain Sam can handle whatever is amiss."

"Mrs. Wrigley, see to our meal. My husband does not like his food burned." Catherine let out a deep breath, instantly regretting dismissing the woman so abruptly. "Don't worry, Mrs. Wrigley. I'll be careful. I promise."

"See that you are. Captain Sam would have my head if he knew I was letting you go out there," Mrs. Wrigley said, wringing her apron in her hands.

Miss Henk helped her into the cloak. Then Catherine grasped her loaded pistol from the table by the door, and slipped it into her cloak's pocket. Sam insisted that a loaded pistol be kept by the front and back doors at all times for the women to use if needed. When she had asked why he wanted them kept loaded, he told her that a pocketful of rocks was more valuable than an unloaded pistol.

Clutching the concealed weapon in her right hand, she stepped out onto the porch. The frigid air gripped the skin on her face. "Sam, what's going on?"

Sam did not look her way, but kept his eyes trained on the two men still mounted on their horses. His hands both held pistols, but his Kentucky long rifle lay on the ground. He must have shot the man

now turning the snow crimson beneath him. Since the rifle held only one shot, he'd wisely tossed the weapon aside.

"I have everything under control. These men were just leaving. Go inside and stay with Little John," Sam ordered.

"I don't know where Little John is," she told him.

"Go inside. Now!" he said. When he used his Captain's voice, everyone understood Sam expected unquestioning agreement and immediate action.

Catherine reluctantly turned and did as he bid her.



"That's a mighty pretty lady you got there, Bloody Hand," the gangly man on a bay horse drawled. "And I'm guessing Little John is your son. Looks like you've planted your seed in her belly again."

Sam eyed the man with contempt. The stranger's words and conduct were outlandishly vulgar and ill-mannered, especially considering that he just shot this man's companion. More than once, his lifelong habit of defending himself first and asking questions later saved the lives of family and himself. When trouble threatens, it usually comes with no warning. "My *name* is Mr. Wyllie, and my wife and my children are none of your concern. This man is," Sam said, pointing to the body lying on the ground between him and the strangers. "Why did he draw his weapon?" he demanded.

"We brought him along for his muscle, not his brains," the heavy-set man said. "Unfortunately, he possessed little tact and even less civility. The use of force was unnecessary. We are here simply to purchase your land back in New Hampshire."

"As I told you, I'm not interested. And unless you want to spend Christmas in a cold grave like your dimwitted friend here, I'd suggest you get moving." Sam's flat response to their unwanted solicitation wasn't what they wanted to hear. He told them he wasn't interested the first time they asked, but instead of responding as a gentleman, the now dead fool replied by moving his horse closer, jerking out one of his pistols, and raising it at Sam.

That was a bad decision.

"Sir, you are correct. Our friend was often senseless and quite boorish. I learned that well enough on our long journey here. Pointing

his weapon at you was clearly a grievous mistake. He forced you to defend yourself," the heavy-set man mounted on a gray horse said.

This man appeared to be the leader.

Sam stepped forward and looked him in the eye. "I'm sorry your partner had to die for nothing. Before any more blood is shed, get off your horses, load your man on his mount, and leave."

"Bury him. He has no family," the leader answered flatly.

"Bury him yourself," Sam told them. "Load him up and leave."

"We're not ready to leave just yet. It took us a long time to find you—several months in fact. It took some convincing, but your brother Edward in Barrington told us where you went," the man on the gray mount said. "And a man in Boonesborough told us you'd moved south of Fort Logan. At Fort Logan, we learned your exact location."

"If you harmed even a hair on Edward's head, I promise you I'll hunt you down from here to kingdom come and remove your hair along with the scalp on your ugly heads," Sam threatened.

"No, no," the leader replied quickly. "We merely offered him a financial incentive and explained that it could mean a nice profit for you."

Sam grew even more suspicious. Edward would never provide information about his family in exchange for money. His brother in New Hampshire must have thought the New York firm would simply be sending a letter to Sam, not three heavily armed men.

"Tell me why you've come all this way just to see me about selling my land and be quicker about it than your dead friend."

"Sir, my name is Wesley Dixon and this is my partner, Thomas Crowell. We represent a firm in Boston and New York that is acquiring land in New Hampshire to quarry stone. As I said, we are here to ask you to sell Wyllie Mountain and the surrounding acreage to us," the man on the gray mount said, sounding a bit too eager.

"As *I said*, the mountain is not for sale," Sam stated firmly. "Get your stone somewhere else." The mountain's daunting presence now loomed only in his mind. But within its shadow, were the graves of three people he once loved dearly.

A forced smile filled Dixon's puffy face and he plunged on carelessly. "We realize you are a well-regarded war hero and earned your reputation through courage and valor. The people around Barrington and Durham spoke highly of you. I must say, your knife is just as big as they described."

Sam remained silent.

"We wish to make you a very generous offer and intend to buy the land from you fair and square. Please forgive our rash partner's actions and my man's disrespectful use of your nickname from the war," Dixon said, with a reproachful sidelong glance at Crowell.

"Your partner is a bit past forgiveness," Sam said.

"Indeed," Crowell agreed, looking down at the man apathetically.

Sam took note that neither Crowell nor Dixon had dismounted to check to see if their companion might still be alive or had any last words. That in itself told him all he needed to know about these two. Their hearts were as cold as the snow now cooling their so-called friend's body.

"It is unfortunate that you gentlemen have come this far because I have no intention of selling my land," Sam said, squinting his eyes against the sun's glare off the snow. "The firm in New York should have sent a letter first to determine if I had any interest in selling. I do not and it is time for you to leave."

Dixon's eyes widened. "Why not? We'll offer you a fair price. The land is abandoned and in disuse. Your brother has no need of it with his prospering general store. Why let the land just sit there wasting away when you possess such a large holding here in Kentucky? Men at Fort Logan told us you own ten thousand acres here."

"And the men we talked to at the tavern in Barrington—that's where we learned your nickname—said you never did any farming or anything on the land we want to buy anyway. Surely you have no need of a rocky mountain in New Hampshire," Crowell added. "You could use the money to buy more stock for your farm here."

Sam squared his shoulders and widened his stance. "What I own and what I do with it is none of your business. I'll ask you but once more to leave." Growing tired of these scoundrels, his lips tightened a fraction more. He wanted these men to leave so he could get back inside and check on Catherine. He hoped all of this did not frighten

her too badly and bring on the pain again.

Sam heard boots crunching in the snow behind him as Garvin and the other hired hands stepped up closer to him. He'd known that they were waiting behind him for some time and he didn't have to look to know that their weapons were drawn.

Garvin eased up next to Sam and motioned toward the body lying in the snow. "Who's the dead man?"

Sam peered up at Dixon waiting for him to answer Garvin's question.

Dixon rolled his eyes. "Bill White. He always was a tactless arrogant ass. And an over confident fool."

"Looks like Mr. White was arrogant one too many times," Garvin said. "I suggest you fellows quickly do as the Captain asked and load your companion on his horse. Mr. Wyllie is not fond of repeating himself."

Dixon glared at Sam and the man's bushy brows drew together in an affronted frown. "Do you mean to say, we have come a thousand miles to discuss this with you and you refuse to even hear our offer?"

"Mr. Dixon, your itinerary is your business, not mine," Sam replied sharply. "What I choose to listen to is my business, not yours. I strongly suggest you leave my land at once."

Garvin raised his Kentucky rifle and pointed it at Dixon. Sam's other men would have their sights trained on both men as well.

"Well, of all the inhospitable people we have encountered in this damn miserable wilderness, I must say, you are the most unwelcoming," Dixon complained as he and Crowell dismounted and lifted the dead man by his arms.

"As you have clearly seen, we don't tolerate disrespectful men in Kentucky," Sam said, "or those who accompany them."

Dixon and Crowell hastily and unceremoniously tossed their companion face down onto his saddle and tied the body to the horse with a rope.

When Dixon started to speak again, Sam's lips twisted in a warning and he glared at the man. He often found it more effective to speak with his eyes than with words.

Sputtering with indignation, Dixon shook his head, clearly infuriated.

The two men mounted at once. Crowell grabbed the reins of the dead man's horse, and they took off at a canter.

"Good riddance," Garvin said.

Sam wasn't so sure they were rid of the two.

Chapter 2

Sam entered the house and hurried over to Catherine, waiting in front of the hearth. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m well, I feel much better. You’re all right? Your men?”

“I’m fine, and so are our men.” Aggravated, he couldn’t hide his vexation and he stomped away from her.

“Sam, what did that man do to cause you to kill him?” Understandably, she sounded worried.

After being outside in the frigid air, the room felt too warm. He tugged off his coat, hung it on a deerhorn, and then answered. “They approached the house without announcing themselves. I asked them why they were here and one of them, a man named Dixon answered, saying he was here to buy my land in New Hampshire. I stopped him at once, said I wasn’t interested, and never would be. I asked them to leave. Then one of his men, the one I killed, hauled out his pistol. When he raised it to point it at me, I shot him.”

Little John stood nearby watching wide-eyed, still tightly grasping his rifle.

“Oh Sam, thank God you weren’t hurt,” Catherine said, clutching his arm.

The feel of her touch warmed him more than the hearth’s fire, but the killing left his heart feeling like a chunk of ice stuck in his chest. “In truth, I intended to only hit the man’s gun arm however his horse jerked at the last second. His death was senseless.”

Disgusted, Sam vigorously swiped his Kentucky rifle with a rag to remove the wet snow from the long barrel and wooden stock. Then he reloaded it and sat the weapon back in its usual place on the wall rack above the entry table. Little John hurried over and placed his rifle on the smaller rack hanging beneath Sam’s rifle.

“Why would he be willing to risk his life?” Catherine asked, as

she removed the pistol from her cloak's pocket and sat it down as well.

Sam helped her remove the cloak. He wasn't surprised that she had come outside prepared to help if necessary. She'd come a long way from the pampered young woman who left Boston two years ago.

"The three came here to get me to sell my land in New Hampshire, including Wyllie Mountain. They want my land for some New York company. The owner must have offered them a substantial bonus if they could convince me to sell."

"Why wouldn't the man you shot accept that you were unwilling to sell?"

"Greed is often the fuel for rash behavior," Sam answered, trying to bridle the anger in his voice. "And some men aren't capable of asking. They're only capable of demanding. They won't take no for an answer."

Catherine sighed heavily and glanced behind her when both the housekeeper and cook approached.

"Is everything all right?" Mrs. Wrigley asked.

"Everything is under control," Sam answered more calmly than he felt. "Please bring Mrs. Wyllie some tea."

"I will, and I'll bring some for young John too, with lots of sugar," she answered with a kind-hearted smile. "And perhaps a wee bit of warm pie," she added, winking at his son. "Some hot coffee for you Mr. Wyllie?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Wrigley. That would be most appreciated," he answered.

The two women turned toward the kitchen and Sam took his usual chair near the hearth. "Where is that midwife?" he asked Catherine, glancing out the window. He realized he sounded impatient and worried. But it couldn't be helped, he was.

"Sam, she'll be here soon. There's nothing to worry about. Truly," Catherine said.

"Would you tell me if there was?"

"Of course. You're my husband and the baby's father. You will

know everything I know."

"What are you worried about?" Little John asked, walking straight up to Sam and looking directly in his face.

Sam hadn't meant to speak worriedly in front of the astute boy and instantly regretted it. "Oh Little John, it's the curse of new fathers to worry overly much about the birth of their children. Catherine will be fine."

"My mother wasn't."

Sam's heart nearly cracked at the sadness in Little John's voice and he swallowed the bitter truth in the child's words.

"Little John, come here," Catherine coaxed, reaching out to their son. "Listen carefully to me. We must not worry needlessly. God wants us to trust Him to protect us. Will you promise to do something for me?"

"Yes Ma."

"Every time you start to worry, I want you to stop and pray a little prayer. It doesn't have to be long. Just a few words will do."

She peered over at Sam and he realized she was speaking to him too.

"What should I say?" Little John asked.

"Tell Him what you feel and ask for His help," she answered.

"That sounds easy," Little John said.

"It is. That's the beauty of it," she said. "He made it easy for us because He loves us."

"How does he hear us?" Little John asked.

"The words of our prayers are written in our hearts, and God can read our hearts," Catherine explained, "just as easily as we can read a book—or a letter from a loved one." She pointed to the letter still lying on the floor.

Little John giggled and reached for the letter. He carefully folded it, put it back in its envelope, and stuffed it into the pocket of his breeches.

Mrs. Wrigley brought the refreshments in and Little John's face instantly brightened at the sight of the slice of apple pie.

"Thank you," Little John said when she handed the plate to him. He hurriedly sat down, cross-legged in front of Catherine.

"My thanks Mrs. Wrigley," Catherine said. "Please tell Miss Henk that I will need her help shortly with the Christmas decorations."

"I'll let her know," the cook replied.

"Can I…help…too?" Little John asked, chewing a mouthful of pie.

"Catherine, are you sure you should be taking on decorating?" Sam asked. "Why don't we just decorate the house with the smiles of family this year?"

Sam realized that his wife grew up in Boston society enjoying Christmases filled with elaborate decorations, huge celebrations, festive balls, and the very best of food and drinks. He hoped she would not miss all of that too much. Perhaps he should make time to help her with the decorations himself.

She sat her teacup back in its saucer. "I have to do something around here. I can't tend my flower and vegetable gardens in the winter and now that we have such capable help, I'm left with little to do. And I love Christmas!"

"Fair enough, but you must promise you won't overtax yourself. And let me know if you need any more evergreens. I'll get them for you. I don't want you out it the forest alone again until after the baby is born." He could hardly believe it when he saw her bring an armful of evergreens into the house earlier.

After she nodded her agreement, he took a few sips of coffee and then headed outside to speak with his men. Before he did, he grabbed a large shovel from a nearby shed and scooped up the blood-tainted snow. The sight of it brought back unwelcome recollections of winter snows turned red with the blood of both the British and his comrades. With bile rising in his throat, he tossed the defiled snow into the nearby woods.

If only he could as easily toss away the haunting war memories that stained his mind.

“That guy you shot didn’t have enough sense to know if he was scratching his pocket watch or winding his ass,” Garvin told Sam when he walked up. “I can’t believe he was dumb enough to draw a gun on you.”

“I agree. It was not smart,” Sam agreed. “I would rather have spilled words than blood.”

“He didn’t seem to be hearing too well,” Garvin said.

“I need you and the men to be extra watchful. I want a guard posted and guarding the house until further notice.”

“Even at night?” Garvin asked.

“Especially at night.”

“I’ll see to it, Mr. Wyllie. Do you think those two will bring more trouble?”

“I do.” Men like that will risk going too far to find out how far they can go. I have a feeling they won’t take no for an answer,” Sam said.

Garvin nodded in agreement, then snugged his worn leather tricorne down a little tighter on his head and buttoned his coat against the chill. With every day that passed, the man was proving to Sam that he was a dependable and skilled farm manager.

As they reached a large horse pen, Sam asked, “How’s my new gelding shaping up?” His usual horse, Alex, was a handsome buckskin with a black mane and tail. He preferred using Alex in most situations because of his experience, but he occasionally enjoyed the challenge of riding a young horse.

“He’s only one man broke, but he’s broke,” Garvin answered. “We’ll start alternating who rides him this week.”

“Now let’s get to working with those new colts. It may take all winter, but I want them ready to sell by spring.”

“Yes Sir,” Garvin said. “I’ll put Harry on it all this week. He’s the best trainer I have. Next week we’ll show you what progress he’s made.”

Sam nodded and pointed to the east side of the house. “I want a good supply of oak firewood stacked right over there.” Sam pointed to

the east side of his home. “And another stack piled high, under the porch next to the back door for the cook’s use. I have a feeling it’s going to be a fierce winter.”

“I agree. The old-timers say you can tell if a winter is to be mild, average, or severe by the thick black hairs on each end of a woolly worm depending on how close they come to reaching the worm’s brown middle. I saw one yesterday and the black on each end nearly met in the middle.”

“Then you’d best make a third pile near the barn to keep you and the other men warm. And stack some uncut logs nearby that we could cut up later if need be. Better to have too much than not enough. We can always use the logs for fencing in the spring.”

“I’ll get James and Matthew both working on it right away.”

“No, just James, he has the stronger arm. I want Mathew on the first shift of guard duty. Be sure he’s well-armed.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Thank you Garvin.”

While Garvin spoke to the farm hands, Sam studied the now graying sky as clouds streamed in forcing the sun’s rays to back away as though they didn’t belong there. The clouds’ dark bottoms and lighter tops, made them appear bottom-heavy. They looked like they might just fall right out of the sky. We’ll get another snow tonight, he thought.

Sam trudged through the snow, thankfully only about three inches deep, until he reached the horse pens holding the young colts.

As Garvin and Harry cut a couple young studs out of the herd and got them saddled, Sam leaned over the split-rail fence and scrutinized the rest of the horses. Before he came to Kentucky, he used to barely tolerate horses, using them as he would any other useful tool. But ever since Stephen’s stallion George died to save Sam’s life, his opinion of horses changed dramatically. Now, he understood how loyal and devoted they could be to a man—and even a man’s family.

And since he started raising horses himself, he truly loved taking part in helping a young horse learn to become the reliable friend it could be for someone on the frontier. Here horses weren’t just a tool—they were a trusted ally for both man and woman.

Even though Stephen's primary interest was raising cattle, his youngest brother was the best in the family when it came to training horses. Stephen had managed to teach Sam quite a lot, especially during the time he and Bear lived with him while they all built Stephen and Jane's home. When their muscles got tired of sawing and hammering, they would all take a break and work with the horses for a while. It was then that Sam decided he wanted to make a living raising and selling horses, while Stephen focused on raising beef cattle.

If Catherine was feeling well, and the babe was healthy, he planned to enter the upcoming horse race at Harrodsburg on January 5, the culmination of the Twelfth Day celebrations. The residents of Harrodsburg at Fort Harrod also thought the Twelfth Night a good occasion for balls, parties, and weddings. With a new babe, it was unlikely she would be able to attend the ball this year.

Perhaps next year they could both attend. Sam nodded and smiled at the thought. Catherine would love that. She gave up so much by living here. He looked forward to giving her the chance to enjoy the festivities and dancing again. At their own wedding celebration, she'd nearly danced him into the ground. It was the first time in his life that he'd enjoyed dancing. How could he not enjoy it with such a stunning woman in his arms?

For a moment, he pondered which of his young horses would give him the best chance of winning. The winner would receive a sizeable purse. Though for him, it was more a matter of pride to own the winning horse. He didn't need the money. He was now a wealthy man thanks to Catherine's considerable fortune.

He grinned remembering how shocked he'd been after they married and Catherine told him she was a rich heiress. And that wasn't the only surprise the beautiful widow had in store for him on their honeymoon. Among other things, he'd learned that she had lost her first baby and the doctor told her she might never conceive again. The doctor had been wrong.

His forehead wrinkled as he suddenly wondered if the doctor meant she *should* never conceive again. If that was true, then…

As if on cue, the midwife, Mrs. Smith, chose that moment to ride up in her wagon.

"Mrs. Smith! I thought you would never get here," he called out from the horse pen, before hurrying over to her as she pulled her

wagon team in front on the house.

“And why, pray tell, would you be thinking a thing like that, Mr. Wyllie? ‘Tis only a few miles to my hamlet and I told you I would be here this afternoon. And here I am!” The gray-haired middle aged woman threw her hands into the air as if she were tossing away his foolishness.

“I…”

“Mr. Wyllie, I am as reliable as the sun rising every morning. Now, help me down and take me to your wife. I need to get home ‘fore it starts to snow.”

Sam started to say something to the perturbing woman, but changed his mind. He helped her out of the wagon, marched up the steps to the porch, opened the door for her, and gallantly bid her enter with a sweep of his arm.

Raising her chin, she gave him a grudging nod and swept past him. As he helped her out of her heavy coat, she glanced up at him. “You don’t need to join us, Mr. Wyllie. This is women’s business—not men’s.”

Sam ignored her, removed his woolen coat, and went in search of Catherine. He found her sitting on the floor of the spare room, weaving red and green ribbons through a lengthy pine garland stretched across her lap. Her long raven hair hung down her back, nearly touching the floor. Even sitting on the floor, she somehow appeared regal. As it so often did, her beauty astounded him. Would he ever grow accustomed to how lovely his wife was? Even after two years, he still couldn’t believe a woman like Catherine could fall in love with a crusty warrior like him. He was only forty-one, but he sometimes felt that he’d lived twice that long.

Miss Henk sat on the floor too, tying clusters of red berries around the ribbon, and adhering both to the garland. And Little John only briefly glanced up from his duty—cutting out paper stars with Catherine’s small sewing scissors. Some of his creations looked more like clouds than stars, including the one he proudly held up for Sam to see.

“Look Pa. I’m making stars!”

“Oh hello, Mrs. Smith,” Catherine said, looking up.

“A woman in your delicate condition should not be sitting on the floor!” the midwife scolded, her face stern.

“I am perfectly fine, Mrs. Smith,” Catherine insisted.

“She was feeling poorly earlier. That damn pain in her side again,” Sam snapped. “This time, I hope you can do something about it.”

With an exasperated look on her face, the mid-wife turned to him. “Sir, if you would be so kind as to go tend to your horses again, I will send Miss Henk to get you when your wife and I are through.”

Sam stared at the woman, incredulous. “I will do no such thing.”

“Sam, please,” Catherine interjected. “Let Mrs. Smith and I have a few moments of privacy. I am perfectly fine.”

Sam gazed into his wife’s blue eyes. Was she being completely honest with him?

Catherine peered up at him expectantly. The color on her face was not as pale as it appeared earlier. Perhaps she was fine. Not wanting to worry Little John any more, he decided to do as they asked. “Well then, let me help you rise.” He placed a hand under each of her shoulders and gently eased her up.

Catherine fluffed out her gown’s skirt, straightened her apron, and smiled up at him. Then she affectionately smoothed the hair on the side of his head, her gorgeous eyes gazing at him lovingly.

Despite his worries, he smiled back, wrapped his arms around his wife and squeezed her affectionately.

The mid-wife stood by impatiently, eyes glaring and her hands on her hips.

When the woman started to speak, he stopped her with a raised hand. He gave Catherine a tender unhurried kiss, needing the reassurance of her lips, and then forced himself to release her. “Come on Little John, I’ll show you our new foal.” He shot a look back at Mrs. Smith and said, “Garvin and I helped the mare deliver it early this morning.”

Mrs. Smith stiffened her spine and shook her head as he and Little John hurried away.



“Men. You can’t do without ‘em, but it sure would make life a lot easier if we could,” Mrs. Smith told her.

Catherine chuckled. “Forgive him. He means well. Miss Henk, I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll keep working here,” the housekeeper replied.

“Shall we go into my bedroom?” Catherine asked.

The mid-wife nodded and followed her inside the room and Catherine shut the door behind her. It was the first time the woman had come inside her bedroom.

“Your home and quarters are the most exquisite I’ve ever seen,” the mid-wife said, mouth agape.

“Thank you. It took me more than a year to get all the furnishings here from Boston. I used to live there and the dealer who furnished my first home helped with all the selections and shipping arrangements. Not surprisingly, considering the distance and conveyance by both boat and wagons, quite a few pieces arrived damaged or scratched, but Sam patiently fixed them all or took them to Fort Logan for repair. Please have a seat.”

Mrs. Smith took a seat on a cushioned chair near the room’s small hearth. “I can’t believe you enjoy such luxury here in the middle of the wilderness. These richly colored rugs must help to keep your room warm. And I see you already have the babe’s cradle. That’s good.”

“Indeed, I ordered it and the cradle’s linens the same week I learned I was with child. It took a few months, but they finally got here.” Catherine ambled over, gently rocked the cradle, and then ran her hand across the soft white baby blanket.

“Now tell me about this ache. Where is it exactly? And how often do you feel it?”

Catherine stood across from the mid-wife and pointed to the exact spot on her right side just beneath her right breast. “It’s becoming more frequent of late. At first it was once or twice a week. Now it’s once or twice a day.”

“I see.” Mrs. Smith stood, placed a hand on Catherine’s stomach,

and felt both sides. “Will ye remove your gown and lie down for me please?”

Catherine kicked off her shoes, slid the gown off, and sat down on the side of the large bed. As soon as she did, she winced. “There it is again.”

The mid-wife laid a gentle hand on the spot.

Catherine’s mind crowded with worry when the woman’s forehead creased.

“Lie down for me and tell me if it eases when you lean back.”

Catherine pressed her shoulders against the soft mattress, tilted her head back, and stretched her abdomen. “Yes, yes it does. Why is that?”

“Give me a minute more.” The woman’s experienced hands roamed her abdomen pressing and feeling, first high on both sides and then lower.

When she finished, Catherine placed a protective hand across her belly. “Please tell me my child is all right.” Tears spawned by fear filled her eyes. She couldn’t lose this baby too. It would kill her. And Sam.

“Indeed, ‘tis big and healthy.”

“Then what is causing my pain? Is it because I’m going to have this child early?”

“No, my dear. It is not.”

Chapter 3

Two days earlier, Boonesborough, Kentucky, Saturday, 17 December, 1799

Bear MacKay frowned at Daniel Breedhead, the lanky owner of the town's large general store. "I canna believe ye do na have a sporran. With all the Scots in these colonies ye would think I could find one."

"Sir, my apologies. I have always meant to order some because I do get the occasional request for one."

"Could ye get one before Christmas?"

"No, I'm afraid I've already received my Christmas stock. But Mister MacKay, you've been a great friend to me, saving me from those robbers last fall, and you and your wife are good customers too. Tell you what I'll do. I'll write to a shopkeeper I know well in Lexington. He has an even larger store than mine. If he has one, I'll have it shipped here."

"I would be grateful. I want a good one, mind ye, like this one." He moved his big knife aside and lifted his own sporran up for the man to see. "'Tis for a special young lad."

Bear thought Little John could use the sporran for collecting rocks and such. And he would tell the boy that it was a way for him to always remember his big Scots uncle.

"I'll be sure to include that in my letter. But it's doubtful it will be here before Christmas."

"Aye, I expected that. I'll just give it to Little John later or pay ye to ship it to him."

"What else are you shopping for today, Sir?"

Bear glanced around him. He needed to find at least two other presents for Little John and several gifts for Stephen's two lasses as well. And a doll for William's wee lassie. Perhaps he would let Artis

pick out the girls' presents before they left for Sam's. She would enjoy that and it might make her feel even more a part of his family. "I need Christmas gifts for a little boy."

"I have just what you need."

Bear followed the thin apron-wearing man through the store to the area where he displayed a nice assortment of toys for children. The shopkeeper picked up a flat of toy soldiers and handed it to him.

"Those little soldiers are made in Germany, stamped, and painted in the colors of our victorious Continental Army. And I have trays of the enemy too, their coats painted red, of course. They are sold by the pound and are quite inexpensive."

Bear noticed the tag attached to the flat. At that price, he could amass an impressive force of troops to give the boy. "Aye, these are perfect. Sam would enjoy playin' with Little John with these too."

He spotted several rocking horses as well. One of those would be just right for Stephen's toddler Samuel. He picked the one that looked the most like Stephen's prized horse.

"And I have a nice set of draughts here," Breedhead pointed out.

"Oh aye, Little John could play checkers with me durin' our visit. I'll take four trays, two of each color, of the wee toy soldiers, this horse, and the draughts. What books do ye have for children?" He loved to read himself and believed in encouraging children to read books.

"I have several titles over here," Breedhead said, as he strode toward the book section. "The History of Little Jack; Original Stories from Real Life; Adventures of a Pincushion; and Keeper's Travels in Search of His Master." Breedhead put each in Bear's hands as he located them.

"I'll take them all," he declared. "I believe wee children need to read as well as play."

"Will you be needing any gifts for your lovely new wife?"

"Aye, she is beautiful," Bear agreed, letting her sweet face and shapely body fill his mind. The delightful image brought a warmth to his chest and made a smile turn up his lips.

"It's only been a few weeks since your wedding. Are you enjoying

married life?"

"I admit, I've fallen in love again every day since we married. I am love-struck, smitten, infatuated, head-over-heels, in love with the lass."

"You are indeed a lucky man. I've never seen a bride as stunning."

"I know I must sound like a besotted young fool, and I guess I am," Bear chuckled, "besotted, I mean. I expect ye think I've misplaced me wits."

"No, it's plain to see that you're just deliriously happy."

"I'm na likely to disagree with ye."

"I'm glad I could come to your wedding at your new splendid home."

"Aye, I am richly blessed."

"By the way," Breedhead said after he finished wrapping the gifts, "I met those friends of yours from back in New Hampshire yesterday."

Bear's brows creased. "What friends?"

"Three men. They said they were friends of your family and that your brother Edward told them that Captain Sam, Stephen, William, and you had all moved to Kentucky. They came in here and wanted to know where Sam lived now."

"What else did they say?"

"They asked me not to tell anyone they were looking for Sam. They wanted to surprise the Captain with a visit. I figured I'd tell you or William anyway the next time I saw either one of you. After all, that wouldn't spoil their surprise. By then, they would likely already be there. "

"Did they have families? Do ye remember their names?"

"No, I watched them leave and I saw no families. It was just the three men. Yes, I think I still have their names. I wrote their names down on their orders—they each bought mostly coffee, bacon, and powder and ball. And one bought ink, quill, and paper too. While I

filled their orders, they went to the tavern and were well in their cups by the time they came back to collect their purchases. One of the three, the rowdy one, was so soused he could barely stay atop his mount. Let me see, I think I have those orders here somewhere on my desk."

While Breedhead rummaged through his disorderly array of paperwork, Bear pondered what this might mean. Why would three men travel without families all the way from New Hampshire to talk to Sam? He didn't remember three single men who were friends of Sam. At least not friends close enough to have come this far. Since the war, Sam pretty much kept to himself. When he wanted company, it was with family. What aroused Bear's misgivings the most was that they'd ask Breedhead not to tell anyone. He raised an eyebrow in suspicion. Something about this didn't add up. In fact, he suspected it would likely only add up to trouble.

"Here it is!" Breedhead declared holding the paper up.

No longer in the mood for gift buying, he told Breedhead he would stop by another time to find Artis a gift and paid him for the toys. Then he wrote down the names of the strangers, grabbed his packages, and headed straight for his brother William's office, towing his horse Camel behind him through the busy street.

A multitude of shops had sprung up to furnish arriving settlers with necessities and desired services. On the main road—thronged with men, horses, and mules—incessant hammering and banging rang out from a half-dozen blacksmiths' sheds, where wagon wheels and axles were being repaired, and horses and oxen shod. A train of emigrants' wagons passed by him as he walked. Bear waved to the multitude of dirty but healthy children's faces peeking out in wonder from under the wagons' covers. After maneuvering his way around wagons loaded with freight of all kinds he passed through the fort's gates.

As Boonesborough's sheriff, William's office and the jail were located in the northwest blockhouse at the fort.

"William, I must speak with ye," he announced as he threw open the door.

William looked up and stood. The reflected light from the hearth fire glimmered over his brother's handsome face and blond hair. "Can it wait a few minutes Bear? I'm almost through interviewing this gentleman for our deputy position. Bill Wallace, may I present my

brother Bear MacKay."

Wallace stood and Bear shook the tall man's firm hand. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Sir."

"And 'tis glad I am to meet ye, Mr. Wallace." Bear glanced back at William. "Aye, it can wait. I'll be at the eatery when ye have finished."

"No, there's no need to leave. Have a seat over there at Deputy Mit…" William stopped himself. "At the deputy's desk. I'm almost through here." Grief briefly touched his brother's crystal blue eyes.

Bear took a seat and remembered seeing Deputy Mitchell sitting right here many a time. He shook his head at the sorrowful memory of the fine young man.

"Well, Mr. Wallace, your credentials are impressive and you come highly recommended by men I respect. When are you available to start?"

"Does that mean I have the job?" Wallace asked hopefully.

"Indeed it does," William told him, smiling. "Congratulations."

"Thank you, Sir. I promise to serve you and this town to the very best of my ability. Although I have both military and civil experience, I know I will learn a great deal working with you and Judge Webb."

The new deputy's words impressed Bear. He was glad his brother would finally have help with his long list of duties. And it would provide someone to watch over the town while they traveled to Cumberland Falls for Christmas.

"Your new quarters are here in the blockhouse, upstairs," William told Wallace, pointing to the stairs behind him. "Why don't you get settled in while I speak with my brother? After lunch, I'll start your training."

"Thank you Sheriff Wyllie. I appreciate this," Wallace said as he shook William's hand. He turned toward Bear. "Very nice to have met you Mr. MacKay. I take it Mr. Wyllie is your half-brother since you have a different last name?"

"Nay, William's parents adopted me when I was a young lad. But we are brothers, to be sure. I lost both me Mum and me Da to illness on our voyage to the colonies. That's why William's parents adopted

me and how I gained five brothers, includin' this ugly one," he said smiling and nodding at William. He enjoyed teasing William about his looks since everyone acknowledged that William was the most handsome of all the brothers.

Bear rose and shook the man's strong rough hand. Bear liked what he saw. Like William, the man carried himself with an air of self-confidence. That would give him a distinct advantage when dealing with lawbreakers. The beginnings of age lines around his mouth and eyes gave him the look of experience, despite appearing to be around thirty years of age. His dark curling hair, a stark contrast to William's straighter blond hair, was cut short and his face clean shaven.

Wallace went outside to retrieve the bags on his horse and Bear took the seat in front of William. He related everything Breedhead told him about the three strangers headed for Sam's place. "If they're na there already, they will be shortly," he told William.

"It is strange, indeed," William said. "But we have no reason to believe there is anything sinister to worry about."

"Aye, we do. They told Breedhead na to tell anyone they were here, claimin' they wanted to surprise Sam. That does na make sense. No one here would race ahead of them to tell Sam they heard he was havin' visitors."

"Agreed."

"And, as ye well know, Sam did na have many close friends. Unlike you, he's always been a bit of a loner. Here's the list of the men's names that Breedhead gave me."

William studied the names for a moment. "I don't recognize any of these names."

"Nor did I. William, we should leave for Cumberland Falls as soon as we can."

"I agree. This all seems rather odd. It may be nothing, but we can't count on that. If those men are bringing trouble, we might be needed."

"Aye. Ye're right. Either ye or I should leave at once," Bear suggested.

"I can't leave because I have to train Wallace for at least a couple of days and introduce him around before I'd feel comfortable leaving

the town in his hands."

"Aye. I'll gladly go," Bear said. "Artis can travel with ye, Kelly, and her father." He hated the idea of being separated from his new wife for even a day, but Sam, Catherine, and Little John might have trouble on their hands. And if they did, he wanted to get there as soon as he could. He'd always been protective of his brothers. He did not intend to stop now.

"That sounds like a sound plan." William stood and studied the calendar hanging on his office wall. "It's Saturday, December 17. You can leave right away. I'll train Wallace and then leave Tuesday the 20th. We'll spend the night at Fort Logan. That should get us to Sam's place by late in the day on Wednesday, the 21st, four days before Christmas."

"'Tis settled then. I'll leave as soon as possible. Promise me ye'll check on Artis every mornin' and each evenin' on yer way to and from town. It should take ye only a few minutes since it is right on yer way."

"It would be my pleasure to do so," William said. "But perhaps she'd rather come stay with Kelly and me. After what she went through last month, she might be reluctant to stay at your place alone."

"Perhaps yer right. I'll suggest that to her."

"I'll stop by on my way home to see what Artis decided."

"My thanks. I just bought these Christmas presents for Little John," he said pointing to the packages sitting by the door. "Would ye mind takin' them home with ye and then bring them in yer wagon when ye leave for Sam's? Perhaps Kelly could help Artis pick out presents for Stephen's girls and yer little Nicole. Or if they can na, could ye?"

"Sure. I always wanted to play Father Christmas."

"Father Christmas is a merry ol' man. Yer merry without a doubt and I do see a wee bit of gray there around yer big ears, but yer still far from lookin' like an old man."

"Then we'll just have to ask Sam to do it," William suggested, laughing.

Bear chuckled. "For yer sake, I will na tell him ye said that. By

the way, yer new deputy seems impressive."

"Thank God he came to me looking for a position. I was beginning to run myself ragged trying to keep up with all my duties here in town and at home. Kelly keeps both her father and me busy. There's nary a spare moment for amusement anymore."

"Nonetheless, ye would na trade yer life with Kelly at Whispering Hills for anythin' would ye?"

"Nope. I've never been so content."

"I feel the same." Bear stood to leave. "Do na forget to introduce Wallace to Lucky McGintey. He might need the old man's sage advice. No one knows Boonesborough as well as Lucky." Both Bear and William considered the aging hunter and long-time companion of Daniel Boone to be a good friend. More than once, Lucky's luck had rubbed off on them.

"That's an excellent suggestion," William said.

"Before I leave for home, I'll find Lucky and ask him to keep an eye on both our places and feed the stock for us while we're gone. I do na think he'll mind."

"We can show our appreciation with a nice bottle of brandy when we get back," William suggested.

"Aye, the old boy would like that."

"Bear, promise me you'll stay safe on your journey." From his sun-toughened face, William leveled concerned eyes on Bear.

"Aye. That I will do. Ye do the same."

Chapter 4

Wyllie Cattle Farm, Kentucky, Friday, 16 December, 1799

Stephen Wyllie' s chest swelled with pride as he surveyed his herd of cattle. When they left New Hampshire more than two years ago, he brought an outstanding young bull and his two best heifers with him. The bull had bred both twice since then, and between them, the cows delivered a bull and three heifers. Now, as they huddled near him, their middles appeared swollen with a calf once again. He had also bought several dozen more cows at a good price from a man who decided to leave Kentucky in a hurry and move to the Ohio territory. Although not as good as the stock that Stephen brought to Kentucky, the new cows all dropped nice calves as well.

Why anyone would want to move further north eluded him. It was cold enough in Kentucky. He buttoned his coat and tied his woolen scarf more snugly around his neck. But the weather here was far better than New Hampshire, where each winter many of his cows froze to death or nearly starved.

He would have to acquire more heifers soon to grow his herd as quickly as he wanted to. Moments ago, Colonel Logan, accompanied by four men from the fort, purchased ten young bulls from him—intending to use the best one for breeding and the other nine to supply winter beef for Fort Logan.

"I have to get back to the fort," Logan told him. "These men will bring the bulls back."

"Thank you, Colonel Logan," Stephen said, looking up at the man, grateful for his first significant sale of cattle.

As Logan rode away, the four men said their goodbyes and then herded the bulls toward the trail to the fort. Stephen wished the bulls had been born heifers, because then he could have kept them. But a herd this size only needed one good bull. And Boone, named in honor of Kentucky's most valiant man, already proved his worth by keeping all of Stephen's cows bred.

Growing tired of waiting on Stephen to feed them, the highest ranking cows—the two he'd brought from his meager farm in New Hampshire—started mooing and bellowing loudly. They had long since become like pets and he reached out and scratched the wiry hair on their foreheads. "Hungry ladies? I know, it's not easy finding grass under this snow."

After he fed grain to all his stock and farm animals, and oats to his prize horse George, the offspring of Stephen's last stallion of the same name and Jane's mare, he headed toward the house. The snow crunched beneath Stephen's worn boots until he stopped at the wood pile to the right of the porch and loaded his arms with firewood. After he entered the large cabin he tugged off the muddy wet boots, leaving them by the door, and sat the logs down by the stone hearth. The brightly blazing fire, along with the kitchen hearth, provided the home's only warmth and he made sure to keep both well supplied with good-sized logs. He didn't want to risk either Jane or his daughters getting sick from a chill.

"Coffee, Stephen?" Jane called from the kitchen.

"Please, my hands could use some warming up," he answered.

Stephen yanked off his coat and scarf and hung them near the door. He walked up behind Jane in the kitchen and tugged her against his chest. Her body would warm him far sooner than the coffee. "Did you miss me?" He pushed her long curly red hair aside, to give him access to her neck, and gently nibbled there before planting a kiss or two. Her skin felt almost hot against his cold lips. And, as usual, the sweet taste of her stirred his blood.

"I did miss you, as always," she said.

Whenever he came in from chores, even if he was working just yards away, Jane often said she missed him. Their souls were so connected, they were two halves of one whole. Whenever separated, it left each of them feeling an emptiness that nothing else could fill.

"My lips are cold," he told her and turned her around to face him. He pressed his mouth against hers, enjoying her warmth and luscious taste.

"You're making me more than miss you," she purred when he finally released her lips. "Wait till I get you under the covers tonight."

"How does it feel to be kissed by a cattle baron?"

“Did you sell some?” she asked excitedly. Her green eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Indeed. Not only did he buy the ten bulls at a nice profit for us, Colonel Logan wants me to supply the fort’s beef for the entire next year!”

“Truly! Oh Stephen, you’re doing what you always wanted to do.”

“It’s what *we* were destined to do together—build a better life for our children—why we made such a perilous journey and sacrificed so much getting here.”

Their eyes met, remembering, and Jane drew in a slow deep breath.

Stephen cleared his throat, not wanting to spoil the happy moment. “And, the Colonel said he’d speak to the commander at Fort Harrod and suggest that I supply their beef as well. With all the militia stationed at both forts, they’re unable to keep up with their need for fresh beef. I’ll be able to sell all the beef I can raise.”

A soft loving curve touched Jane’s lips. “That’s wonderful news!”

“I want to buy the girls a nice Christmas present,” Stephen whispered. “We can make a quick trip to the shops at Fort Logan or Harrodsburg if you prefer.”

“Fort Logan, it’s closer and this time of year the weather might turn bad.” She handed him the coffee sweetened with an enormous smile on her pretty face. “Presents would make them both so happy, Stephen. It’s been a long time since they received any new toys. I was worried Father Christmas wasn’t coming this year.”

“Of course he is! But after we buy the gifts and necessities, I’m going to reinvest the rest of the funds into buying more cows. I’ll need to increase my herd size to be able to keep up with the needs of both forts.”

“I agree.”

“And I decided I am going to enter George in that Twelfth Day race in Harrodsburg in January. The purse is substantial and it could mean buying all the cows we’ll need.”

“Stephen, are you sure George is ready? He’s so young and still a

little green. There will be stiff competition coming from all over Kentucky. Probably some attending from Virginia horse farms as well."

"I've trained him every day since he was old enough to ride and he's come along quite well. He's a magnificent stallion. Maybe even better than his father was, and you know how much I loved him. He's as graceful as a dancer and as powerful as an English war horse. And he has a big heart, Jane. He'll do anything I ask of him."

"Unlike me?" Amusement flickered in her eyes.

"Well, now that you mention it…"

She swatted him with a towel and he ducked. She enjoyed their gentle sparring as much as he did.

"Father, is it Christmas yet?" Polly asked, suddenly appearing in the kitchen with her big sister Martha right behind her.

"No, Polly, Christmas isn't for a while yet," he answered patiently.

"Why do you keep asking the same question?" Martha scolded.

"Because I love Christmas."

Martha sighed heavily. "I love Christmas too. But loving it won't make it come any faster," she declared.

Martha, their ten-year-old daughter, tended to think much like her mother. She looked like her too. Her wild curls refused taming and her green eyes could blaze with the same temper Jane displayed—often quick to anger and just as quick to cool.

Polly, his seven-year-old, looked like him—her dark hair flowed from a center part and she had blue eyes. Also like him, she was slow to rile. Although when something finally made her mad, the whole world knew about it. And she wouldn't forgive until she was good and ready.

But he couldn't complain. Both girls were generally well behaved. Most important of all, they were healthy. That meant everything to him.

"Would you please read Bear's letter to us again?" Polly asked her mother.

Although the girls could both read well, they preferred for Jane to read Bear's letters aloud. With a good deal of Scots blood in her too, Jane could imitate Bear's Scottish brogue perfectly.

"Are you through studying your lessons?" Jane asked the two.

"Yes," they both answered at once.

"All of them? The Primer? Speller? Mathematics? Your history lesson?"

"Yes!" Martha answered. "The history lesson was the best part."

"I liked the rhymes in the Primer," Polly said.

"What's the rhyme for the letter T?" Stephen quizzed.

"Time cuts down all, both great and small," Polly answered right away.

Sad, but true, Stephen thought.

"Then I will read the letter. Let's get you both a big cup of warm milk and then go sit at the table and I'll read it," Jane said. "Do you want a little sugar in your milk?"

Now that was a silly question. Had she ever known her daughters to say no to sweetened milk? Come to think of it, it sounded pretty good to Stephen too. "I'll have one too, please," he told Jane, holding up his empty coffee cup.

"I'll make one especially for you," Jane said. She winked, smiled sensuously, and lightly fingered the tendrils of hair on his cheek before taking the mug from his hand.

Just that slight caress made the rest of his body ache, craving her touch.

Jane was obviously in a mood to celebrate. Stephen was too. He'd leave the real celebration for tonight. For now, he'd rest a while and enjoy the company of his family. But then he needed to get back to his fence building. He wanted to get the new fence built before the ground became too frozen to dig.

They all took their usual seats around the pine slab table. Jane brought the milk on a tray. After serving their daughters, she handed him his favorite mug and he took a sip and grinned at the taste of the

milk flavored with sugar and rum.

Jane held her glass up and toasted. “To many more sales of fat cattle.”

“And to many more years of happiness with my family,” Stephen added.

“Amen,” Jane said. “Now where did I put that letter?” She went to the secretary against the wall and pulled down the cover. “Ah, here it is.”

After plucking the letter from its envelope, she began, *“Dearest Family, ‘Tis is my great pleasure to inform ye that my new bride, Artis, and I will be coming to visit for Christmas. We plan to leave with William’s family on December 21 and should arrive during the late evening of the 22nd weather permitting. Of course, we will bring presents for all the children…”*

Polly let out a squeal and clapped her hands even though she’d already heard the letter four or five times.

Jane smiled down at her and then continued, *“…and celebratory beverages for the adults. I can’t wait for ye to meet Artis—she’s the most wonderful woman in the world. And the most beautiful.*

We will meet ye at Sam and Catherine’s place and celebrate the best Christmas ever.

Until then, we send our love,

Bear”

The letter made Stephen miss his huge brother. He was more like a blood brother than an adopted one and he thought of him just as he did his other brothers. Like Jane, he was anxious to meet Artis.

Stephen hoped their journey from Boonesborough to Sam’s would be a safe one. The wilderness was fraught with risks and danger. Ruthless men were most often the source of threats, but the frontier held other perils as well. He glanced over at the black wolf skin laying at the foot of his favorite chair. The wolf nearly took his life on their long journey to Kentucky. It was just one of the many hazards he, Jane, and the rest of their family faced as they sought the rich lands opening up in the new state of Kentucky.

Samuel’s cries brought Stephen’s attention back. “I’ll get him,” he

volunteered and stood. He headed for their bedroom to retrieve his son.

“So, you’ve woken from your nap and you’re ready to take on the world are you?” He checked to be sure Samuel’s cloth was still clean. Thankfully, it was.

He gave the two-year-old a hug, enjoying the sweet scent Samuel always seemed to give off after a nap. Stephen carried his son into the front room.

Still waking up, Samuel yawned, clutching his favorite toy—a stuffed horse—in his chubby hands. Stephen sat down and kept his son in his lap, sitting him astride his leg.

“Samuel, want some milk?” Polly asked. She held her pewter goblet up to her brother’s lips and he sucked in a few sips, still working on how to drink from a cup.

Samuel pointed a finger at Stephen’s face. “Pa,” he told his sister.

Martha and Polly both giggled. “We know his name Samuel,” Martha said. “We call him Father, not Pa. It’s more dignified.”

Stephen and Jane both grinned. Their precocious daughter must have learned the word dignified in a recent lesson.

“Pa,” Samuel said again, looking up at Stephen.

Stephen couldn’t keep from laughing and lifted his son into his arms. Samuel wrapped his little arms around Stephen’s neck. “He’s getting heavier and taller,” he told Jane. “Don’t you think he’s big for his age?” Stephen’s chest swelled a little with pride once again.

“I suspect he’s going to take after his Uncle Sam,” Jane said. “In more ways than one.”

That suited Stephen just fine. He respected no man more than his brother, Sam.

Chapter 5

Highland Farm, near Boonesborough, Kentucky, Saturday, 17 December, 1799

Bear dreaded telling Artis that he needed to leave. She would not be pleased. He urged his horse Camel from a walk to a trot as he started out on the road to his home—Highland Farm. He didn't want to make his horse gallop because Camel would have a long day ahead of him. Bear planned to leave as soon as possible and ride the rest of the day and into the night.

He knew the way to Sam's place well, having made the journey several times in the last two years. So traveling at night would not be a problem for him. This time of year, he preferred it to sleeping on cold ground.

The last time he made the trek, he'd set out for Boonesborough at the request of Colonel Logan to represent Fort Logan at a special meeting called by the Governor. Even before Logan asked him to attend the meeting, he had come to the realization that it was time for him to leave Sam and Catherine's place and find a wife. Never in his wildest dreams would he have expected to find a woman as special and wonderful as Artis. Perfect for him, he loved her beyond measure.

Like him, Artis grew up in the Highlands of Scotland, but when a man named Steller murdered her mother and set fire to her village, fate forced her into indentured servitude on a Virginia plantation. Seven years later, she received her freedom dues—land in Kentucky. The very land they lived on now.

As Bear neared Highland, it struck him once again just how beautiful their home was, especially now with patches of snow sprinkled here and there among the hardwoods and evergreens. And he recently bought the mostly cleared acreage adjoining their land to use as a side pasture for grazing the horses they would raise.

A born horsewoman, Artis adored her stallion, Glasgow, given to her by her former employer, a Virginia plantation owner. She'd named

the horse after the city in Scotland from which both she and Bear, at different points in their lives, departed to sail for the colonies. During her seven-year indenture, she had helped to groom, train, and race the horse. Using the spectacular stallion as a stud would start their herd very well.

As he rode up, Bear watched the prized stallion graze on winter grass in the new side pasture beside Artis' other horse, a good-looking mare she'd named Beautiful. He should have asked William to keep an eye on the horses too. But knowing his conscientious brother, William would anyway.

Glasgow glanced up and whinnied at Camel. The gelding lifted his head and nickered back at his pasture buddy. The mare continued to graze, paying no heed to Camel.

"I wish I could let ye out to graze with yer friend, Glasgow," he told Camel, "but we need to go check on Sam and his family."

He rode to their new stable and after dismounting gave the horse a generous portion of feed. Camel would need plenty of energy for their journey. Bear didn't bother to unsaddle. He could pack in no time and be on his way shortly.

Unless, Artis tempted him beyond his control and lured him into their bed as she often did. Nay, he could not afford to delay—even for that.

As he entered through the back door, he called out to her. "Artis."

"Back so soon? I thought ye said ye were goin' to be in town most of the day."

"Aye, I was. Then I learned that three suspicious strangers are headin' for Sam's place. The three left Boonesborough yesterday."

"What do ye intend?"

"I'm leaving at once. I need to be sure Sam and his family are all right."

"Leaving?"

"Aye. There might be trouble. And if there is, I intend to be there. Ye can stay here at Highland if ye like, but I'd prefer ye to stay with Kelly and William for the next three days. They plan to leave early on

the 20th and ye can travel with them."

"Bloody hell. I will na stay here. 'Tis a shoddy plan ye've come up with."

"I did na ask ye to stay here. I asked ye to stay with William and Kelly."

"I meant I'm going with ye!" she declared.

"Artis, I need to travel fast," he protested.

"Do ye think my Glasgow is na fast enough?"

"Aye, of course he is. I've na seen faster."

"Then ye must be thinkin' 'tis I who could na keep up with ye!" She crossed her arms in front of her and shot him a penetrating stare.

"I know ye could for a while, my love. But I'll be travelin' the rest of the day and most of the night at a hard pace."

Her face flushed and her eyes flashed in anger. "Hmph. Do ye forget I worked as a plantation laborer for the last seven years? I'm na some pampered noblewoman!" Her voice rang with indignation.

He gently clamped his fingers onto her shoulders and looked into her fiery green eyes. "Artis, love, I know well how strong ye are." *And beautiful too*, he thought. Even when her temper flared. Perhaps especially when her temper flared because it made her green eyes sparkle like jewels. "However, I might be ridin' into danger and ye've had more than yer share of perils of late."

"Aye, 'tis true enough. But I vowed to remain by yer side in both good and bad times. And that I will do!"

Bear could see he stood little chance of convincing her to remain here without him. Still he hesitated. He'd vowed to protect her for the rest of her life. "Artis. I ask ye to reconsider this."

"Nay, I will na. Whatever dangers we face, we face together. I feel safer with ye than with anyone." She kissed the tip of her forefinger and then pressed it against his lips. "Besides, I do na think I could bear to be separated from ye, even for a few days, my big red-haired Bear."

He reached for her and hauled her against his chest. "Then ye

must promise me ye'll be careful and do exactly as I say. I've spent many years in the wild and ye must listen to me always if ye're to stay safe."

"Aye, I'll listen Bear. Ye can be sure of that."

Reluctantly, he released her. Since there was no talking the woman out of it, he decided they should leave at early dawn instead. He didn't want to risk Glasgow stumbling in the dark and Artis taking a fall. "Ye know, I think we should leave at dawn. We can travel faster and safer in the daylight. We can pack our bags tonight."

"Aye, that does sound wiser."

"I'll go get Glasgow from the pasture and get him fed and stalled and unsaddle Camel. Will ye pack up our bags and enough food and coffee for at least three days?" He believed in always taking at least an extra day of provisions in case of unforeseen delays. "I'll only need my spare buckskins. Oh, and perhaps my nice clothes for the Christmas or New Year celebrations. And my clan badge, of course."

"Of course. Should I bring anythin' else?"

"Blankets for sleepin' a wee bit. I do na want to stop at Fort Logan for the night. I'll want to press on until dark. And take yer dirk and pistol."

"Will it na be cold sleepin' on the ground this time of year?"

"We'll build a nice fire and take but a short rest. And, of course, ye'll have me big body to keep ye warm."

"Aye, ye're warmer than any fire," she said, with a smile.

"'Tis ye that makes me so, wife," he said. He strode toward the door to retrieve Glasgow, but stopped and turned around. "Oh, I asked William to stop by to check on ye on the way home. He should be here soon. When he does, I'll let him know ye decided to come with me. And after William's family leaves, Lucky McGintey will stop by to check on our places and feed the stock for us."

"Did you tell him to take good care of Beautiful?" she asked.

"Aye. Your mare's in good hands with Lucky."

As he hurried toward the pasture, Bear's heart beat faster than normal with both anticipation and foreboding. Hopefully, nothing

would be amiss with the strangers and their trip would just mean he would see his family sooner than planned. Most of all, he couldn't wait to wrap his arms around his nephew, Little John, and give the lad a huge hug.



Artis hastily closed and latched all the shutters and then locked and barred the front door, since Bear always came in the back door. In no time, she finished packing the bags she'd set on their bearskin covered bed, cramming as many clothes and toiletries into the traveling cases as she could fit. After she dressed in the morning, she would need to remember her brush, comb, and silver hair clasp too. With her long wavy hair, forgetting those would be a disaster.

News of the strangers disturbed her too, but perhaps 'twas all a misunderstanding and they posed no threat to Sam or his family. She prayed it would be so.

She couldn't wait to meet Bear's oldest brother. After all the stories she had heard Bear tell of his brother, a former captain in the Continental Army, she realized how much Sam meant to Bear. And, how much he admired Sam for his bravery and high standards.

Bear described Catherine as an elegant, nearly regal woman who loved fashion and fine things—far different from Artis. She owned only one truly fine article of clothing—her wedding dress—and she wasn't about to stuff that beautiful gown into the little bag. Generally, she preferred plain gowns and sturdy boots, but she recently purchased a fashionable but simple royal blue gown and matching slippers that she thought would work for Christmas. She added two of her plain everyday gowns. They would just have to do until she found the time to have more new gowns made. For traveling, she laid out her olive green riding habit because it was her most comfortable.

When she could think of nothing else to pack, she sat their bags on the floor against the wall and smoothed out the bearskin blanket covering their bed. Just last night, Bear had made love to her beneath that warm haven for their passion. Her face warmed with the memory of the ecstasy of being wrapped in his strong arms and the way he'd made her cry out in pleasure. He was so gentle, loving, and tender. Yet each time they made love, he released a fury of intense lust and fervent feelings that burst from deep within her.

And, when needed, he could also release an entirely different kind of fury on an enemy. Shortly after they were married, she had

witnessed that terrible ferocity first hand.

She hoped she would never have to see it again.



Bear woke Artis with a kiss. “Time to rise my love.”

She opened her eyes to a room still dark, without even a hint of dawn. Excited about their first trip together, Artis didn’t mind the early hour and came instantly awake.

After quickly dressing, Bear left to go saddle both horses.

While he was gone, she washed up, brushed and secured her long hair with her silver clasp, and tugged her woolen hose over her cold toes. After securing the warm stockings with garters, she donned her riding habit over her shift and pulled on her leather boots. Then she attached the sheaths for her dirk and pistol to her wide leather belt, strapped it on, and stuck the weapons in place. She slipped the strap for the bag containing her powder and ball over her head and beneath her hair. Next, she grabbed the gold wool traveling coat that Bear bought for her recently. It would be warm, practical, and durable. And the vented back of the coat allowed movability, always desirable when riding a powerful steed.

She was ready. For what, exactly, she didn’t know. But she guessed it would be an exciting adventure. She loved the thought of that. As long as she was with Bear, she would be happy.

Carrying her traveling coat, brown leather gloves, and her favorite dark green bonnet, Artis hurried to the kitchen. Setting the warm clothing aside, she found a sack to put their food in. She included a miniature pot of butter, four apples, and a half-block of cheese. After wrapping it in a towel, she added a bottle of wine. She didn’t want to arrive empty handed. After all, it was a Christmas celebration. Lastly, she tossed in the two large loaves of bread she had baked yesterday afternoon. She smiled, pleased that she had finally mastered how to make a decent loaf of bread.

The bag was getting full, but she squeezed in the coffee, a small pot, and two pewter cups. After securely tying it closed, she sat it near the back door.

Using sand from the pail she kept by each fireplace, she put out the fires in the hearths, making sure both no longer smoked. With her heart filled with excitement, she raced to the back entrance.

Bear opened the door and nearly ran into her. Grabbing her, he asked, “Ready my love?”

“Ready for what?” she teased with a wink.

“If only we could,” Bear said, “but we dare na take the time.”

“I was only jestin’ with ye my lusty husband,” she said as she tugged her gloves on and then donned her heavy coat. “Our travelin’ bags are packed and sittin’ next to the wall by the bed. I’ve locked up everythin’ too. I think there’s naught left for ye to do but load our bags.”

Bear hurried back to their bedroom to retrieve their baggage.

Artis put the bonnet over her head and tied its ribbon securely under her chin. It was her one concession to fashion. Called a calash, the hat would protect her face and hair from wind and weather. With its whalebone stiffening and ribbons, the calash's silk hood would remain securely on her head, even in a strong wind.

Finished dressing, she tied the food bag onto Glasgow’s saddle with a sturdy rope. “Ready for a ride my big fine lad?” She stroked the horse’s shiny black coat. Bear must have brushed Glasgow well before saddling the stallion. Every one of the well-muscled horse’s movements caught the light from the torch hanging on the outside wall.

She glanced up when Bear came out with their bags, his broad shoulders and brawny arms carrying their traveling cases as if they weighed nothing at all. After he tied their bags securely on the horses, locked up, and put out the torch, they both mounted.

Bear glanced over at her. “Ready?”

“Aye. Let’s be off then,” she said. She smiled at her braw handsome husband and once again thanked the good Lord for bringing Bear to her. Or perhaps, God brought her to Bear. Either way, they were destined to meet.

Destined to spend their lives loving one another.

And, when necessary, protecting each other and their families.

Chapter 6

Cumberland Falls Horse Farm, Kentucky, Monday, 19 December, 1799

"Then everything is fine?" Catherine asked the midwife as she awkwardly sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She gripped the bed covering in one of her fists as she waited for the woman's answer.

"No my dear, it is not. But all may be well yet. I think the babe's head may be under your right rib. When he stretches or moves it causes you discomfort."

"He?"

"The babe takes after the Captain—big and tall. Your child is already so sizeable, I strongly suspect you will bear a son. He's long and that may be why he is stuck where he is for now."

"I thought the head was supposed to face down."

The mid-wife nodded. "It is." Mrs. Smith tried to smile, but Catherine could see worry clouding the woman's eyes.

Catherine's heart pounded in her chest. She could not lose another baby. It would be the death of her. And probably Sam too. His greatest fear—no his only fear—had always been losing her.

She reached out and gripped the midwife's hand. "Mrs. Smith, what does this mean, exactly?"

"Well, that depends. The babe could still turn in time. But the closer it gets to your time, the less likely it is your babe will flip because there's just not enough room. If he does turn, then you would have a normal delivery."

"And if he doesn't?" She couldn't keep her voice from trembling.

"Let's just pray that he does turn. Then all will be well."

"But what if he comes early and hasn't turned yet?" She tried to ignore the dread clenching her heart.

“Then your delivery could be…difficult,” the woman replied in a low, flat voice.

A wretchedness filled Catherine’s mind. Tears started to burn her eyes and she swallowed against the tightness in her throat. “Mrs. Smith, do not tell Mr. Wyllie any of this. He’s worried enough as it is. Let’s wait until your next visit and if my baby’s position still poses a problem, I’ll tell him then.”

Mrs. Smith lifted her brows, but nodded her agreement. Grabbing her heavy cloak, she said, “Knowing the Captain, that may be wise. I’ll be back in a couple of days. In the meantime, I want you to drink at least five cups of coffee a day. The stimulant in it will make the babe more active and perhaps cause him to turn. The babe’s movement may cause even more soreness on your side. Just remember, what you’re feeling is just his head pressing into your ribs. Your boy needs to get back where he belongs.”

“I will pray unceasingly that he does so,” Catherine said. Her eyes traveled over Mrs. Smith’s face, searching for hope or reassurance. But the woman’s gaze dropped, disturbing her even more.

Mrs. Smith turned toward the bedroom door and said, “I must hurry away before your husband has a chance to grill me like an insubordinate soldier under his command.”

Catherine’s hands trembled as she opened the front door for Mrs. Smith and bid her goodbye from the porch. As she watched the woman’s wagon roll away, a cold knot formed in her stomach and tears welled in her eyes. She pressed her fingers against her mouth to keep from crying out. A breech baby meant significant risk for both the mother and the child. She shuddered at the terrifying thought and gave up trying to hold back the tears that flowed down her cheeks. Pulling up her apron, she wiped her tears, but they kept coming, just as fast as her worried thoughts.

Her baby wasn’t even born, yet even now he faced terrible danger.



Little John spent most of the day playing in the nearby creeks, woods, and meadows, collecting treasures like feathers and pretty rocks that he kept in a secret nook inside one of the sheds. He couldn’t wait until summer, when he could climb trees, watch tadpoles wiggle in muddy puddles, admire butterflies as they flittered through the

weeds and wildflowers, and discover salamanders hiding under cool rocks in the stream.

It was harder to find interesting things to collect in the winter, but sometimes he got lucky. Today, he even found an arrowhead. When he got cold, he went inside to show it to Mrs. Wrigley and his mother. He often warmed up in the kitchen so Mrs. Wrigley wouldn't get lonely. He kept her company while he drank warm tea and ate the cookies she'd always give him. He wanted to show his mother the arrowhead, but Mrs. Wrigley told him she was busy with the midwife, so he went out the back door and started down the trail leading away from their house, intending to go hunt rabbits. But as soon as he heard voices on the front porch he stopped.

He watched, hidden behind a large pine tree as the midwife left their house. When her wagon passed by him, Mrs. Smith's wrinkled face was frowning even more than usual.

The old woman shook her head and muttered loudly, "I'm going to lose sleep over this one."

That made him think something was wrong.

The midwife snapped the wagon team's reins harshly and hurried away.

He wasn't exactly sure what a midwife did, but when he'd asked, his Pa told him that the woman would help his mother with delivering the baby that grew inside of her. Then, he'd asked why the midwife came today, because his mother didn't act as if she was having a baby now. His Pa said it was to be sure everything was all right.

That meant something might not be right. Judging by the look on the woman's face, the midwife's visit must not have gone well.

He shifted his face to the other side of the tree trunk and glanced back at his mother. She still stood on the porch. Her eyes gleamed as though she wanted to cry. Then she clasped her hands to her mouth as if she were trying to hold something in. But it didn't work. She started crying.

The sight caused him to fret even more and he didn't feel much like hunting now. His rifle clutched tightly in his hands, he turned into the woods. His lips quivered and his eyes burned. He wanted to get away. Somewhere where he could cry without anyone noticing.

What if she died, just like his first mother did?

Worry squeezed his chest and made him shiver. He began walking faster as scary thoughts built in his mind. Soon he started to run. His boots hit soggy earth, now and then, where the sun's rays poked through the bare tree branches, melting the snow. In other places, his strides crossed patches of thick snow nestled in the shade of evergreen trees.

He'd known panic only once before, when he'd fallen into that hidden cave. It felt just like this. Like he was falling into something black and terrifying.



A stab of guilt pierced Catherine's heart. She'd been unable to safely bring her first baby into this world. Would this child suffer the same fate because of her? She closed her eyes, her heart aching with remembered grief for one child and mounting fear for the other.

Because she loved Sam so dearly, she already deeply loved this babe. She didn't even know it was possible to love as much as she loved this infant still growing inside her. She glanced down and placed a hand on her belly. She could almost feel the child reaching out for his mother's love—a love that was special and unique—and without a doubt a gift from above.

Remember what you told Little John, suddenly came into her head. Bowing her head, she promptly did as she'd bid the boy. She simply asked God to keep her and her baby safe and give her courage. Feeling better, she stood there a moment, letting the cool air soothe her face and calm her heated emotions. She dried her eyes with the corner of her apron, took a few deep breaths of the pine scented air, and let them out slowly. With each new breath, her heart felt more at ease.

As the noisy wagon disappeared down the road, Catherine composed herself and wiped her face in time to hide her tears before Sam sprinted up to the porch.

"Damn that ornery old woman. She left without speaking to me. Well? What did she have to say?"

Catherine hesitated not wanting to lie to Sam. "She thinks I will bear a big healthy son."

Sam's eyes widened and his face lit with joy. "A son?"

“Yes, Sam. She thinks it’s a boy because he’s so big. She thinks he’ll be tall, like you. Speaking of tall boys, where’s Little John?”

“He asked permission earlier to hunt rabbit and I told him to be back before dark. I should have made him stay close to the house after what happened this morning.”

“I’m sure those men are well on their way back to New Hampshire. They could hardly have mistaken your refusal to sell.”

“Catherine, what about the ache in your side? Did she have any idea what was causing it?”

“Well, he’s so big he’s putting pressure on my right ribs.” It was the truth, just not all of it.

Sam put his strong arms around her and hugged her. He gently pulled her against his broad chest and kissed the top of her head.

She listened to his heart pound in his chest and breathed in his soothing scent. He smelled of horses, wood, and a hint of the tobacco from the pipe he occasionally smoked. His arms tightened around her and, feeling wrapped in the cocoon of her husband’s love, she relaxed. His touch was so comforting it almost made her want to cry again. “I love you Sam.”

“And I love you, Catherine. You’re my treasure.”

Sam had first called her his treasure when she’d finally revealed that she was a wealthy woman—very wealthy in fact. She’d kept it a secret, wanting to be sure he was marrying her for the right reasons. After their wedding, and their first night together, his tenderness and passion for pleasing her convinced Catherine that he truly loved her. He was so unlike her cold first husband who had married her for prestige and gain, certainly not love. The way Sam made love to her on their honeymoon at Cumberland Falls, and ever since then, conveyed that he truly treasured her. As she did him.

If only they could always be this happy together.

He pressed his mouth to hers. The warmth of his lips and the feel of his strong arms removed the chill she’d buried within her heart and filled her with renewed hope.



Little John swiped at the tears streaming down his cheeks. He

couldn't let anyone see him like this, especially his Pa. He believed a man should strive to be strong and brave—always.

But right now, he didn't feel brave and he certainly didn't feel like a man. Ashamed, he admitted to himself that he was merely a frightened boy.

He was scared stiff that his mother would die.

What did she say he should do when he was worried? Talk to God. He'd never talked to the Lord about anything important before. Just silly boy stuff and prayers at the table to say thanks for his food and family.

He tried to decide what he should tell God. He never felt much for his first mother, except maybe sadness that he never got a chance to know her. He remembered her name—Diana—although he knew little else about her. And, while he felt affection whenever he thought about Diana, he never actually felt love for her.

He loved Catherine. She was his mother now and always would be…unless she died. He wanted God to let her stay with him. He didn't want her to go live in heaven. She needed to live here with him and Pa. His Pa loved her. A whole lot. He could tell. She couldn't die. That's what he would pray for!

Please don't let her die. My *Pa and I need her. Please. Amen*.

But would God listen? Would she die anyway? Angered, at the thought, he stopped abruptly, his heart pounding. "No!" he screamed into the forest. "Let her stay!"

He leaned over and tried to catch his breath. His heaving chest felt as if it would burst. How long had he been running? He leaned his back and head against a big tree, breathing hard.

He choked back more tears but his insides still churned with fear. In his chest, his heart trembled. He could *not* lose his new mother. He just couldn't! He stomped his foot, crunching twigs and snow under his boots. Then he paced in a little circle, his face down, trying to think.

He wished Bear were here to talk to. Bear always seemed to know what to say. He pictured Bear's kind face and could almost see his uncle smiling back at him. That made him feel a little better.

Little John looked up, wiped the tears from his eyes with his

knuckle, and stared ahead. He recognized the area having hunted here with his Pa several times. But this was his first time to be here alone. The trees surrounding him grew thick and tall. Their dense canopy of boughs and branches made it darker than the woods closer to his house. He heard sounds and gritted his teeth as he listened. Probably just skittering mice or scampering hares.

He gripped his rifle a little tighter. His Pa would want him to stay alert. Anything could happen in a forest. At the thought, his stomach prickled and his heart started to beat fast again.

He should turn back. All the noise he made running through the timber would have scared off any game anyway.

Then he heard something.

Men's voices.

He whirled around.

Chapter 7

Between Boonesborough and Cumberland Falls, Sunday, 18 December, 1799

As the sun rose well up into the sky, Bear and Artis rode side by side on Boone's Trace, the trail leading due south from Boonesborough. They'd been riding hard since before daylight and would need to stop soon to let the horses have a rest.

Bear glanced over at Artis. She actually seemed to be enjoying herself. An excellent horsewoman, she loved to ride Glasgow. As he watched her handle the big stallion with ease, his heart swelled with pride. She could probably ride anything with hooves.

"Let's stop here so we can water and rest the horses," he called over to her when they reached a babbling creek rippling past grand sycamores. Shafts of soft light speared down through the tree branches, bathing the water's surface in glinting sparkles.

"Aye, they need a rest and this is a beautiful spot."

They took brief respite, quenching their thirst and stretching their legs, then soon resumed riding. The trail they followed cut a path through trees so dense at times the massive hardwoods blocked out the sky over the road. All afternoon, a series of switchbacks kept them meandering up, down, and around rolling hills.

After several winter freezes, the normally blue-green grass that grew in the meadows between the rises now appeared as colorless as straw. Although not as nourishing for animals, the dried grass still filled their empty bellies.

Occasionally, a few startled deer would lope across one of the meadows or elk would raise their heads, languidly lifting their wide antlers while grazing, unafraid of the intruders.

They passed areas where the last snow must have fallen heavily while in other areas hardly any snow at all covered the ground. At the top of one hill in the distance, tall pines lined up on the ridge one

behind the other, and stood like a proud army of nature awaiting their arrival.

Bear and Artis rode through only two small settlements—Hazel Patch and Crab Orchard. Although they greeted and waved to the few people there, they didn't stop. Bear didn't want to get caught in a long conversation. He had no time to chat. Not today.

His brother might need him.

Fortunately, there were no major rivers to cross on the way to Sam's place. The beautiful Kentucky River ran just north of Boonesborough and the majestic Cumberland marked the far southern edge of Sam and Catherine's property. Occasionally they would hear a waterway colliding with rocks and limestone boulders and then, as they smelled the fresh clean scent of the water, the stream or a creek would come into view. The ones they needed to cross were only deep enough to reach the bottom of his stirrups, which allowed them to stay dry. In the winter, that could be extremely fortunate. Cold wet feet were something he did not tolerate well.

Before the sky fully darkened, they slowed their horses as a lively creek crossed their path once again. Artis followed Bear as he maneuvered Camel away from the road and up the bank line to a lovely secluded spot. A surprised fox trotted out and ran off as they neared a place that suited Bear.

He dismounted and unsaddled Camel while Artis did the same for Glasgow. As they led the horses to the creek to water, he was struck by how soothing the spot was. Perhaps it would calm his jittery nerves. Ever since Breedhead described the three strangers to him, he had remained on edge. Instinct, bred into him by countless generations of Scottish warriors, made him wary. He would remain on guard until he knew for a certainty that all was well.

They waited patiently until the horses drank their fill and then walked them back to the campsite. Then he released both mounts out to graze for a while. Camel would never abandon him and the stallion would stay close to Artis.

He went back to the creek again to wash up and fill their canteens. By the time he finished, the moon hung low in the sky, its light glistening across the water and spilling into the trees around him. Even in the dark, he found the spot's untamed beauty awe-inspiring. He loved being in the wild and had long believed that a man's heart too long away from nature would become hard.

When he returned, Artis had untied the food bag and spread the contents out on one of their blankets. “Should we take the time to build a fire and make coffee?” she asked.

“Aye. If we’re to ride most of the night, we’ll be needin’ some and we need to eat. I’ll collect some wood.”

“Where? There’s naught but grass here and na enough light to see by.”

“My eyes are sharp in the darkness. I’ll find enough for a fire under that stand of timber over there,” he said, pointing. “Take yer blanket, stretch out, and rest yer back. I’ll wake ye when the fire’s hot.”

Without argument, for once, Artis spread her blanket and took his suggestion.

When he got back with an armful of firewood, her breathing told him that she slept. He grinned when he noticed her firm grip on her dirk. The weapon had once belonged to her grandfather. Not only did she treasure it for that reason, she was wise enough to keep it close for protection.

His smile grew even wider as he noticed just how beautiful she appeared lying there in the moonlight. Her flawless skin almost shimmered and her red-gold hair glimmered as it caught the moonbeams. “Ye’re an exceedingly lucky man,” he whispered to himself.

Within a few minutes, a cook fire glowed with bright curling flames and the coffee water bubbled. He added a few spoonfuls of coffee to the small pot. When it finished brewing, he would wake Artis.

Famished, he leaned back against his saddle, pulled off a hunk of bread, and spread it with butter. The first mouthful tasted so delightful it nearly made his eyes water with pleasure. He’d been blessed with a healthy appetite since his youth. After he’d married Artis, Kelly shared some of her cooking skills with his new bride, and Artis rapidly became a talented cook. He could not remember ever tasting better bread.

Nonetheless, he wouldn’t call cooking her most significant talent. His wife’s abilities in their bed chamber seemed to blossom with every coupling. Like a lovely rose, she unfolded her charms petal by petal.

He glanced over at Artis again. As she slept, the skirt of her riding habit had inched up and no longer covered her long legs. The sight of their shapely form, even covered with her woolen hose, made his pulse quicken. His instinctive response, powerful and compelling, made him helpless to resist.

He removed the brewing coffee from the fire and set it aside on top of a rock. He stood and removed his hatchet, long knife, and pistols from his belt, but kept them within reach. Then he removed his belt, powder horn, lead bag, and sporran. He moved to her blanket and eased down next to her. The swell of her breasts protruded from the top of her riding habit and he swallowed tightly at the alluring sight.

"Artis," he whispered. Even the sound of her name was sensuous.

She moved toward him, and a delightful shiver of wanting surged through him. Her eyes opened a little and she smiled up at him. His heart lurched wildly. Her nearness kindled feelings as hot as the fire burning near them.

She reached up, placed her hands on the back of his neck, and pulled him closer. His heart thudded against her breasts. Then he felt the warmth of her soft lips as he pressed his mouth to hers. He reached down and lifted her skirt and shift even higher. He released her lips and glanced down. The fire's flames lit her womanhood beguilingly, sending a long hot tremor down his spine.

Artis' hand drew his head back down so she could reach his mouth with her own. Her tongue caressed his while her hands roamed over his back. Everywhere she touched his skin tingled.

He gently nibbled on her lower lip until he sensed passion rising within her and then he deepened the kiss.

Soon, the kiss made his entire body throb with need and he loosened his leather breeches. But he continued to softly kiss her lips, neck, shoulders, and breasts, until she could no longer lie still beneath him.

When she urged him on top of her, he knew she was ready. Ready to experience the love they shared so completely.



Lying next to Bear beneath the stars, Artis sighed contentedly. With her head nestled on his shoulder, Bear slept beside her, keeping

her comfortably warm. Feeling a pleasant stupor, she soon fell back to sleep herself.

As he usually did, Bear woke her with a kiss. They ate and after drinking a cup of steaming coffee, that warmed her hands as well as her insides, they quickly prepared to leave. Within minutes, they were again on their way.

Hour after hour, they rode, alternating between a slow gallop and a brisk trot. As usual, Glasgow's long strong legs kept up the pace with little effort. However, Camel began to slow, obviously growing tired from carrying Bear's weight for so long.

"Do ye think we should switch horses?" she asked. "Camel seems to grow tired of carryin' ye."

"Nay, he'll be fine. We've made this trip together many a time. But we'll slow for a bit and then stop at first light to let them water and rest."

When the blackness of the night sky faded to a sooty gray, Bear suggested that they stop for a while. While Bear watered their mounts and then stretched his legs, she watched in awe as the sun rose. The undersides of the puffy clouds above the horizon glowed brilliantly, lighting up the sky with the fiery oranges and pinks that only God could create.

With an urgency she'd never seen in Bear before, they soon pressed on.

By the time the sun shone brightly in the sky, they neared a river that appeared deeper than any they'd crossed so far. To the right, a misty waterfall tumbled over large boulders. As the water flowed further downstream, the sun's rays made thousands of tiny diamonds sparkle and dance on the river's surface.

"That's Rock Castle River, the northern edge of their land. However, 'twill still take us the rest of the day to reach their house," Bear explained. He urged Camel into the frigid river and Artis followed. Even with Glasgow's long legs, in mid-stream the water grew high enough to reach her boots. She took a firmer grip on the reins and lifted her feet out of the stirrups in an effort to keep them dry.

Both horses managed to reach the far bank without any difficulty and they resumed following the trail. Artis gazed at the land

surrounding them. It was truly stunning—a lush virgin paradise. She didn't think it was possible to find a place as lovely as Highland, but this acreage just might be. Massive ancient trees, the tallest she'd ever seen, grew everywhere, their immense branches reaching for the morning sun. Even Bear would find it impossible to wrap his long arms around their trunks. His oldest brother's family should count themselves fortunate to live in such a wondrous place.

Bear had explained that Catherine's late husband, murdered in front of her during her journey to Kentucky, willed 10,000 acres to Catherine. After falling in love with Sam and marrying him, the two selected a site for their home near Cumberland Falls, where they had honeymooned.

As she rode, Artis also remembered what Bear had told her about Stephen and Jane. Soon after she married Sam, Catherine insisted on giving a thousand acres to Stephen so they could build a home before winter and start their cattle operation. Stephen had insisted he would repay them, in part by keeping Sam's family supplied with beef.

Bear slowed his horse and pointed. "Stephen and Jane's place is just down that road."

"Are we goin' to stop there before we go further?" she asked, turning Glasgow so she could face Bear.

"Nay, 'twould delay us too long. Somethin' tells me I need to get to Sam's soon." Bear's expression darkened.

"I can tell ye're worried."

"Indeed. I will na rest easy until I can see that the three of them are well."

Sensing his growing apprehension, Artis urged Glasgow to a faster gallop and Camel, who seemed to have caught his second wind, quickly matched the larger horse's pace.

Chapter 8

Fort Logan, Kentucky, Monday, 19 December, 1799

"Don't forget to get extra sugar," Stephen called after Jane. "You know I want *your* mincemeat pie for Christmas. No one makes one quite as good as yours. You can bring it with us to Sam and Catherine's."

Her shopping list in hand, Jane whirled around, smiling. "Indeed, with all the baking for Christmas, I'll need plenty. And extra flour too."

Stephen waited atop George while Martha climbed into the wagon seat vacated by her mother and took the reins of the horse team. When she turned ten, he'd allowed her to start driving the team as long as he or Jane were with her. That rule would remain in place until she turned fifteen or so. He'd not risk her safety.

Polly sat behind the wagon seat on two sacks of feed, with Samuel laying on a thick blanket next to her sound asleep.

At the mention of Christmas sweets, smiles had lit up the faces of both his daughters. That gave him an idea.

"Come on girls, let's go find that baker. All of a sudden, I'm in the mood for a sweet roll," Stephen said.

As he rode beside Martha toward the bakery located on the north side of Fort Logan, he ticked off all the items piled in the back of the wagon. He didn't want to forget anything. Trips to shop here at the fort were few and far between, especially in the winter. They'd traveled to the fort Sunday afternoon and spent the night here so that they could get an early start on their shopping first thing that morning.

It was only mid-morning and his purchases already included feed, barrels, horseshoes, square nails, a keg of salt, powder and ball, and a new horse blanket for his stallion George. They also had all just come from the dressmaker and tailor's shops where Stephen purchased a gorgeous lace-trimmed green gown with embroidered stomacher for

Jane and new red dresses for the girls to wear on Christmas. For himself, he bought a simple cravat, a new gray waistcoat, and black shirt and leather breeches. They'd also visited the shoemaker and bought new boots for the girls. He wanted them to all look stylish and well-dressed for the holidays and the big horse race.

In addition to the gifts, sugar, and flour, Jane planned to buy candlewicks, cornmeal, a barrel of fat, and fabric and ribbons for new dresses for the girls. The two grew so fast, they seemed to outgrow their dresses before Jane could get another one made for each of them.

He intended to keep the girls distracted for at least an hour while Jane shopped for both their presents and gifts for his nephew, Little John, and his niece, Nicole, William and Kelly's daughter. The general store kept a good selection of toys on hand to sell to parents living at the fort and to families of the surrounding area.

"Martha, keep the team rolling across the enclosure at a slow pace. We don't want to wake Samuel. You know how cranky he gets if his nap is interrupted," Stephen told his daughter.

"I know," Martha said rolling her eyes. "But I'm so hungry."

"Me too," Polly echoed.

"Me three," Stephen said. His meager and cold breakfast disappeared long ago, leaving his stomach empty and growling. "Nevertheless, go slow." Stephen was trying to kill a little time as well as let Samuel continue his nap.

He waved to the few men with whom he was acquainted as he passed them by, but there were many people he didn't recognize. The fort's population appeared to have doubled since their last visit here. Men and their families, wagons, horses, and mules crowded into every spare spot within the enclosure. And many others camped in wagons or tents outside the fort's palisade made of sturdy logs.

When they arrived at the bakery, Stephen dismounted, tied George to the back of the wagon, and then held his arms up to help first Martha and then Polly down. Polly fell into his outstretched arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I love you, father!"

Stephen smiled, kissed her cheek, and said, "And I love you, daughter!"

Then he put her down with a bounce and reached in for Samuel, trying his best not to wake his son.

“The air smells like cinnamon,” Polly said, taking a deep breath.

“And frosting,” Martha said. “I want something with lots of icing.”

Both girls bobbled on their toes and swung their arms excitedly as they waited for him.

Stephen nestled Samuel over his arm and shoulder. When he looked up, he saw Colonel Logan hurrying across the enclosure, headed directly for him.

“You two go on inside and pick out one treat each. And something for your mother and Samuel too. I’ll be in shortly,” he told them. “And don’t touch anything unless the owner tells you to.”

“Stephen Wyllie!” the Colonel called out. “I was hoping I’d see you or your brother Sam soon.”

“Hello, Colonel,” Stephen said, extending his free hand in greeting to the tall imposing leader.

Concern filled Logan’s pale blue eyes. “I need to speak with you.”

“Certainly. Is something wrong?”

“Maybe. Three men came by the fort yesterday. I didn’t like the looks of them from the beginning. They said they were looking for Sam and wanted directions to his place. When I asked them why they needed to speak with the Captain, a man named Dixon said they were friends of your brother. They’d traveled here all the way from New Hampshire to speak to him about selling his land back home. Against my better judgment, I gave them directions to Sam’s place.”

“Hmph,” Stephen snorted. Sam would never sell that land. The mountain held the bodies of their parents and only sister after an enormous mountain slide covered their entire childhood home. People in the area soon took to calling it Wyllie Mountain. Sam, as the oldest son, inherited the property. However, he never did anything with it, choosing to let the land be a serene resting place for their lost family members. “I’m sure they came all this way for nothing, but why is that cause for concern?”

“Because men don’t travel a thousand miles just to buy a piece of

land. There must be another reason."

"Indeed," Stephen agreed. "What reason did they give?"

"That they wanted to buy the mountain to quarry stone."

"Now that last part does sound suspicious. Sam's mountain is mostly stone, but there's rock to quarry all over the state. He would have told them no flat out. The mountain holds special significance to our family. He'd never sell it and he would have told them so in no uncertain terms."

"Knowing the Captain, I'd have to agree. He doesn't strike me as the kind of man who would be indecisive or hesitate to say what he thinks."

"True enough." Stephen let out a long sigh. This was all vaguely disturbing. "Why would they come all this way? They could have sent a letter expressing their interest in acquiring the site."

"That's what I wondered," the Colonel agreed. "It's a long way just to buy a piece of property."

Stephen shifted Samuel to his other side, letting the boy's head rest on his shoulder. His son grew heavier by the day. "Colonel, you met these men. Do you think I should go to Sam's right away to be sure all is well?"

"Well," the Colonel rubbed the back of his neck as he considered Stephen's question. "After many years in the military and politics, I've become a decent judge of character. And something about those men bothers me all the way to the soles of my boots."

"Then I'll go."

"Your family is welcome to stay here if need be. I'll find quarters for them."

"No, we were going to Sam's anyway in a few days for a Christmas visit. I'll just move our visit up. We'll leave for home now, then leave for Sam's first thing in the morning. With the girls, I don't want to spend the night out in the open."

"Do you want me to send a couple of my militia along with you?"

"No. Jane and I both have our rifles and pistols with us. She's an excellent shot, by the way. And Sam has four hired hands at his farm,"

Stephen answered. “Tell me what these men look like and their names.”

As the Colonel finished answering, the door to the bakery opened and Martha poked her head out. “Father, we made our choices. Can you come pay for them please?”

“I’ll be right there,” he answered. “Thank you Colonel. I appreciate your concern for my family.”

“You and your brothers are all fine men. We need more like you here in the wilderness. Will Bear be going to Sam’s for Christmas too?”

“Indeed. And William and his family as well.”

“It sounds like you’ll have a joyous holiday. I hope I get a chance to see Bear again and ask him about the Governor’s meeting I sent him to in Boonesborough.”

“I’m sure Bear will want to thank you whole-heartedly. Sending him there was fortuitous—he met his new wife Artis in Boonesborough. He’s bringing her to meet all of us.”

The Colonel laughed and slapped a hand against his long leg. “When he was here last, Bear told me he was setting out to find a bride. By God he did it!”

“I think it actually *was* the good Lord’s doing. Bear wrote us that she’s from Scotland too and he seems exceedingly happy,” Stephen said.

“I’ll look forward to meeting her. I’m anxious to meet William as well. His excellent reputation as sheriff of Boonesborough precedes him.”

“Will you be at the Twelfth Day horse race?” Stephen asked.

“No, my duties here prevent my attending.”

“I plan to enter my stallion in the race. I’m sure Bear and William will come along to cheer me on. Sam may not be able to come if Catherine has not yet delivered.”

“You’re entering this big black?” The Colonel ran a hand over George’s hip.

“Yes, that’s George.” Stephen couldn’t help smiling proudly.

“He’s a handsome fellow. Exceptional. Perhaps I’ll bring a mare to you for breeding.”

“Father!” Polly called out impatiently, her brows and lips pinched together.

“I see you’re urgently needed elsewhere,” the Colonel said, smiling. Then his face turned serious. “Stephen, I hope I’m wrong about those men.”

“I hope you are too.”

Chapter 9

Boonesborough, Monday, 19 December, 1799

Carrying his bag of medicines and surgeon's instruments, Rory McGuffin blew out the oil lamp and locked the door to Boonesborough's apothecary, glad to see the day finally end.

Rory never thought he would practice medicine again, but when Doc McDowell asked for his help, he simply couldn't refuse. He enjoyed helping people—it was why he'd become a doctor in the first place. He spent a few weeks with McDowell, brushing up on the latest theories and techniques, but soon learned his excellent medical education was still well-founded.

In truth, it felt good to be needed and use the skills that took him years to acquire. Just today, among other things, he'd pulled an abscessed tooth, lanced a boil, treated a snakebite, and set a little boy's broken wrist. What would these people have done if he hadn't agreed to cover for the town's doctor every other week while McDowell treated his patients in Lexington. They surely would have all suffered needlessly.

He'd set those skills aside for an extremely long time—ever since the last patient he lost on the battlefield—his brother's son. Only when Bear's wife Artis would have died if he hadn't helped her did he finally reveal to everyone that he served as a surgeon during the Revolution. For more years than he wanted to remember, he'd treated every conceivable battle wound and illness of the soldiers and camp followers.

After the war, never wanting to see one of his patients die again, Rory became a trapper, living with his wife and daughter in a modest cabin on Shenandoah Mountain. He'd enjoyed the solitude of trapping, but then Kelly's mother died while he was on one of his hunting trips. Another tragic death on his hands. If only he had been there. The loss of his beloved wife was nearly the end of him as he sought to ease his pain with strong liquor. It was Kelly who had suffered the most though. He had given up on life and on Kelly when she needed him

the most.

But later, when he came close to losing Kelly, he begged her forgiveness. Kelly gave it, willingly and lovingly. And now it seemed as though his heart may have finally healed enough to put his skills to good use again.

“Good evening Dr. McGuffin,” Lucky McGintey called from atop his horse. “Calling it a day?” The aging longhunter eased his mount, and the packhorse he led, loaded with today’s kills, closer to the apothecary. The man was dressed in buckskins and tall moccasins, much like Sam always was. His back and shoulders slumped, Lucky appeared tired. Despite his age, he continued to hunt every single day, supplying fresh meat for the settlement.

“Indeed, I am calling it a day,” he answered, rubbing the back of his neck. “This day has made me feel my age. Lately, I wake up feeling a month older instead of a day older.”

“I know exactly what you mean!” Lucky said cackling. “But here’s what I think. You’re only as old as your attitude, not your body. So I keep on smiling and keep putting my old foot in the stirrup. When God’s ready to take me home, I’ll go, but until then, I’m going to enjoy life if it kills me.”

Rory let Lucky’s words sink in, and then burst out laughing.

The old hunter chuckled too in a deep, jovial way. When Lucky finally quit, he asked, “How are Kelly and your sweet granddaughter doing?”

“They are all hale and excited about leaving tomorrow for our visit to Sam and Catherine’s place for Christmas.”

“Yep, Bear told me about your trip and asked me to look after his place and William’s while all of you were gone. I’ll take care of feeding the horses and stock too.”

“We appreciate your help, Lucky.”

“Would you do a favor for an old man?” Lucky asked.

Concerned, he glanced up and studied Lucky’s weathered face. “Certainly. Are you not well? Do you need me to reopen the apothecary?”

“If I were any better, I’d be in heaven. I just wanted you to tell

the Captain and Catherine howdy for me and send my Christmas wishes to them."

"Well, of course I will. I can't wait to see them again myself. According to Sam's last letter, Catherine is due to deliver soon. Perhaps we will have more to celebrate than the birth of our Lord."

Lucky nodded in agreement. "It's tavern time. Care to join me?"

Rory shook his head. He'd sworn off liquor for the rest of his life. Drinking to excess had almost cost him his daughter's life. "I thank you for your invitation, Sir, but I need to pick up some gifts for the children. I hope Breedhead isn't sold out."

"I'll leave you to make your purchases then." Lucky waved as he rode away toward the tavern and eatery.

"Have a blessed holiday," Rory called after Lucky. As he watched the old fellow ride away, he decided he would ask Sam if he could invite Lucky to join them next year.

He hurried to the general store and, as he entered, he delighted in the store's unique fragrance. A blend of spices, leathers, grains, coffee, gunpowder, and at least a dozen of other scents. Breedhead still had several customers and would likely have to stay open past the store's normal closing time. Like most men, Rory dreaded shopping and had procrastinated until the last minute. He quickly selected an assortment of toys and even found a pretty hair comb for Kelly. After all, she would always be his little girl, even if she was married and had a child of her own.

After he paid, he retrieved his horse from the livery, loaded his packages, and hurried over to the fort to meet up with William. On the days he worked at the apothecary, he and William normally rode to and from Boonesborough together. Kelly would have a nice meal prepared and he didn't want to be too late. She'd scold them both if her meal got overcooked.

William's horse, Smoke, stood saddled and waiting outside the office.

"Ready?" William asked him as he entered the sheriff's office.

"Indeed. It has been a particularly long day."

"Good night, Dr. McGuffin. Have a safe journey and pleasant visit with your family."

“Good night Deputy Wallace,” Rory said as he turned to leave.

Speaking to William, Wallace added, “I’ll see you in a couple of weeks. Don’t worry sheriff, the judge will be here while you’re gone if I need help with anything.”

“I’m not worried,” William said, “I know I’m leaving the town in capable hands. And Judge Webb and Colonel Byrd are here to assist you if needed.”

Wallace stood a little taller and shook William’s hand. “Thank you, Sir. And please have a wonderful time with your family. You’ve earned some time off.”

“Thank you Deputy. I’ll be back in early January, right after the Twelfth Day race.”

“That’s twelve days starting on Christmas, right?”

“Yes,” William said. “The twelve days are 25 December to 5 January. So we should be back home around the seventh or eighth.”

“We’d best be on our way,” Rory said. “You know how your wife gets when we keep her dinner waiting.”

“You mean how *your* daughter gets!” William laughed and snugged his tricorne onto his head. “I do know. Let’s hurry!”



“Gwaaanpa,” Nicole said as Rory opened the door to Kelly and William’s cabin. Not quite two years old, the pronunciation of some words still eluded Nicole.

William’s long legs swept past him and his son-in-law lifted Nicole into his arms before McGuffin could reach her. Whenever William and he arrived together, they’d both race in to see who could pick Nicole up first. The game seemed to amuse his granddaughter.

“Your Father got you first tonight,” Rory told her. “But I’ll win next time!”

“Kiss mama!” Nicole commanded her father and pointed a tiny finger at her mother.

William carried his daughter over to Kelly and gave his wife a big kiss. Riley, their big golden dog, wagged his tail furiously, as he

romped next to them. It was another game they all played. As soon as he got home, Nicole would tell her father to kiss her mother and Riley would escort the two over to Kelly. McGuffin suspected that it was William's favorite of the many games they played.

"How's my daughter? Did you have a good day helping your mother pack for our trip?" William asked Nicole. He gave Riley a vigorous pat or two and then sat down at the table with Nicole balanced on one leg. Riley instantly jumped up and planted his front legs across William's other leg. William gave both a big hug.

"She did have a good day," Kelly answered for her. "We are all packed up and ready to go."

"Go," Nicole repeated, "see Unc' Bear."

"And have a wonderful family Christmas!" Rory told her. He missed celebrating Christmas with his family at his childhood home on their Virginia plantation. They followed the old Christmas customs of their English ancestors who lived in fine manor houses. He remembered enjoying ample feasts, dancing, gambling on horse races, hunting, and visiting relatives. His oldest brother, in keeping with custom, inherited their family home and the plantation. He couldn't help but wonder if he still celebrated Christmas with gusto as their parents had. Perhaps one Christmas, he would pay him a visit.

"I'd like to leave by daybreak," William said, "earlier if possible."

"I'll be ready and have the wagon team hitched," Rory said.

"Oh, I almost forgot the presents for the children," William told Kelly. "We unloaded them onto the porch before we stalled the horses."

"I'll get them," Rory volunteered, "you have your hands full." He went outside and brought several packages back, stacking them beside the luggage neatly piled by the door.

"Since Bear had to leave sooner than he planned, he wanted us to pick out presents for Stephen's girls and…" William paused and peered into his daughter's happy face, "…and Nicole!"

The child giggled with glee and clapped her tiny hands. "Pwesssscents!"

William turned to Kelly. "Since you didn't get a chance to get into town, I went ahead and purchased the gifts. And I bought Nicole

a warm wool coat. A blue one."

"Oh William, that's wonderful! She needed it. We'll all need to wear warm clothing," Kelly said. "After we eat, I'll tie some pretty ribbons on the packages."

"And we should bring plenty of blankets and furs," Rory said. "I don't want Nicole to catch a chill."

"Agreed," William said. "But if she does, she'll have her own personal physician." William glanced over at him and winked.

"True," Rory said, "but it's much easier to prevent an illness than it is to cure one."

"Pa, did you bring your medicines home with you?" Kelly asked.

"Yes, I brought everything I could think of. I should have all we might require. Hopefully, we won't need any of it."

"Now all we need is a couple of days of mild traveling weather," Kelly said.

"No problem, we'll ask Father Christmas to bring it!" Rory said, grinning at Nicole.

He couldn't wait to spend a peaceful Christmas with his family.

Chapter 10

Cumberland Falls Horse Farm, Kentucky, late Monday, 19 December, 1799

"Garvin!" Sam yelled into the barn as he approached. When his farm manager rushed out, he asked, "Have you seen my son?"

"No, Sir. Do you want me to ask the other men?"

"Yes, and be quick about it." Sam paced outside the barn, wearing a path in the snow down to the dirt. Where could the boy be? He scanned around him, hoping to spot his son. But he only saw a crimson sunset gleaming through the dark woods. He could not take time to appreciate its beauty now. He began to worry in earnest as his mind clouded with the terrible possibilities. Was Little John hurt? Did a wild animal find him? Was he lost?

Garvin hurried back and reported the men had seen no sign of the boy and Little John's horse was still in the barn. "Do you want us to get saddled and start a search?"

Sam rubbed the tense muscles on the back of his neck. It was nearly dark. Little John should have returned by now. The boy never disobeyed him. Well, almost never. But he doubted Little John would want to be out after dark. He looked up at Garvin. "Yes, have the other men saddle up, and tell them to each bring a torch. Have one of them saddle Alex for me. I want you to stay behind. Stand guard on the front porch and keep your eyes wide open. If my son returns, fire one shot into the air."

"Yes, Sir. I'll speak to the men and be right there."

Sam rushed to the house, leapt onto the porch, and called to his wife as he burst through the door. "Catherine!"

She hurried into the front room. "Is something wrong?"

"I pray not. Little John never came back from hunting and it's getting late."

"Oh no," Catherine said, covering her mouth with a hand.

Concern quickly filled her eyes.

A wave of apprehension gripped Sam. “I checked the house earlier. When I didn’t find him, I starting searching everywhere. He hasn’t come back in here has he?”

“No, I don’t think he’s inside. I haven’t seen him for hours. Could he be hiding somewhere? Maybe playing some kind of game?”

“Little John!” Sam shouted up the stairs as loudly as he could. They heard no response, except both the cook and housekeeper came rushing out of their quarters appearing alarmed. The urgency in his voice must have worried the women.

He quickly approached the two. “Have either of you seen Little John?”

“No, Sir,” they both said in unison.

“What do you think it means?” Catherine asked, her fists clenched tightly at her sides.

Sam could hear the alarm in her voice. The last thing she needed was this upsetting her. “God only knows. It’s not like John to disobey me, I asked him to be home before dark. Three of our men and I are leaving to search for him. I told Garvin to stand guard in front of the house in case you need him. Keep the back and front doors barred until further notice.”

The cook and housekeeper nodded their understanding.

“All right, Sam. Please be careful,” Catherine said.

He took hold of her hands. “I will, Catherine. We’ll find him,” he promised emphatically. “Please try not to fret. It’s not good for you or the babe.” She would likely worry anyway, but he had to say it.

He turned toward the cook and housekeeper. “I want you ladies to be sure Catherine rests while I’m gone. And take good care of her!” It sounded like an order because it was.

“We will Captain,” Mrs. Wrigley promised while Miss Henk lit a few candles to brighten the dark room. “We’ll be praying that you find Mister John with all speed.”

Sam glanced toward the door at the sound of the hired hands riding up outside the house. “Time to go.” Since it was winter, the

only time he ever wore a hat, he snugged his tricorne over his head. To ward off the frigid night air, he exchanged his light coat for a heavier one. As always, he carried his long knife, but he grabbed his Kentucky rifle, powder horn, lead bag, and a second flintlock pistol as well. “I’m going to let Garvin use your rifle, Catherine, so he’ll have two rifle shots, if needed.”

“Of course,” she replied.

He kissed Catherine before he left. A man should never leave his wife without kissing her. *Life is entirely too precarious and one never knows what threats the day may hold…or the night.*

He tossed Catherine’s rifle to Garvin, snatched up Alex’s reins, and sprang on top of the big gelding.

He peered down at Garvin. “Guard Catherine and the other women. If anything happens and I’m needed, use your rifle and Catherine’s rifle to fire two shots into the air. Remember, one if Little John comes back, two if my wife needs me.”



“We’re getting’ close,” Bear told Artis. “I can see the smoke from their hearth risin’ above the tree line.”

“Na a moment too soon,” Artis said. “I’m near freezin’. It’s grown far colder in the last hour.”

“Aye, it has. Feels like snow’s comin’. That hearth fire and a hot cup of coffee will be most welcome.”

As they rounded a corner on the trail, Bear heard men hollering and horses in the distance. Several mounts. Was it Sam? He peered ahead and saw riders coming up the path toward them. “I think that may be Sam. Na one sits a horse quite like Sam. I can see his buckskin’s dun-colored coat. He has three men with him.” He turned a worried glance toward Artis. “They’re callin’ out for Little John!”

Bear urged his horse to a run, quickly confirming that it was indeed Sam with three men.

“Bear!” Sam called out.

Within a few moments, Bear tugged Camel to a stop in front of Sam’s horse. Artis pulled up behind him.

Sam's rugged face was tight and grim. "Thank the Lord, you've come early! Little John is missing!"

"Missin'?" Bear swallowed the alarm that tightened his throat. "For how long?"

Worry filled Sam's eyes. "He was supposed to be back before dark. We just set out to search for him. You can help."

Even in the dim light, Bear could see how alarmed Sam was and his own heart tightened with apprehension. A boy alone in the woods at night was cause for true concern.

"Aye, of course I'll help," Bear replied.

"I'll help as well," Artis said.

"Sam, this is my wife Artis."

"It's a great pleasure to finally meet you," Sam said. "Forgive me if my mind is elsewhere."

"There's nothin' to forgive ," Artis replied. "How can we help?"

"Where are ye headed?" Bear asked Sam.

"We've been calling for him ever since we left the house, with no luck. There's a nice stand of timber about a half mile up ahead where Little John and I usually hunt. He may have gone there. It's far enough away that sounds from the house and barn don't scare off the game."

"Did the lad go hunting?" Artis asked.

"He did," Sam answered, "earlier this afternoon. These men are my hands—Harry, James, and Matthew. I left Garvin guarding the house."

The men said hello to Bear and nodded to Artis.

All three appeared to Bear to be strong young men, but James was by far the brawniest of the three.

"Artis, I'm sure you're cold and tired," Sam said quickly, trying to move things along. "My men and Bear will help me find my son. Go on ahead to the house and meet Catherine. Stay on this trail and it will lead you right there in about a half mile. I'm sure Catherine's

terribly worried and could use your company."

Bear could tell Artis started to protest. He was sure she wanted to help find the boy too, but he hoped she would do as Sam asked. She had to be exhausted and she'd just told him she was near freezing.

"Of course, if that's what ye want me to do," she said, with a sidelong look at Bear.

"Get warm my love. We'll be back soon," Bear told her.

"Let's go!" Sam urged. "Keep calling Little John's name. When we reach the woods, we'll spread out and move in an easterly line through the trees."



Knowing the stallion was too tired to lope, Artis walked Glasgow toward Sam and Catherine's home. This was not the joyous reunion she had envisioned. She prayed the boy would be all right. The child was dear to Bear and, of course, Sam and Catherine would be devastated if something happened to Little John.

As she rode closer to the impressive two-story log home, a man yelled out from the long porch. "Who goes there?"

Artis could see the man standing near the home's entry, silhouetted against the candlelight coming from the house's windows. She also saw a rifle pointed at her.

"Sir, I am Artis MacKay, Bear's wife and sister-in-law to Sam and Catherine."

"Oh, forgive me Mrs. MacKay," the man said, lowering the rifle. "I'm Garvin Cotter, the farm manager. I'll let Mrs. Wyllie know you're here." He stuck his head in the door and called out, "Mrs. Wyllie, Mrs. MacKay has arrived."

When Artis dismounted, after so long in the saddle, her knees nearly buckled. Gripping her saddle until she steadied herself, she said, "My husband has gone with Captain Sam to help search for Little John."

"Would you like me to stable and feed your mount?" Garvin volunteered. "He certainly is a fine animal."

"Oh aye, that would be most appreciated, Mr. Cotter. His name is

Glasgow. Please feed him well. He's earned it."

Garvin removed her bags from her horse and set them on the porch. "I'll bring those in for you in a bit. Please tell Mrs. Wyllie to keep the door barred until I return from the barn."

"Aye. Thank ye, Mr. Cotter." She approached the porch, hoping she could be of some comfort to Catherine. Before she reached the top step, one of the most gorgeous women she'd ever seen stepped out, arms extended in greeting. This must be Catherine. Bear was right. Even heavy with child, the woman was positively elegant. Her long raven hair gleamed and above her high cheekbones, her beautiful big eyes looked like the sparkling blue waters of a Highland loch. But worry marred her delicate features.

"Artis, welcome! I'm Catherine. I'm sorry you have arrived during a family crisis. Our son has gone…missing." Catherine swallowed, looking as though she wanted to cry, but wouldn't allow herself.

"I know. We encountered Sam and his men as we approached yer home," Artis replied. "I'm so sorry this has happened. I hope all will be well soon." Artis put her arms around Catherine and leaned forward, trying her best to hug the woman, but Catherine's enormous belly made it somewhat awkward.

"Please, come in. You must be frozen, starved, and beyond tired." Catherine led her inside and helped Artis out of her traveling coat. While Artis removed her gloves and weapons, Catherine hung the coat and her bonnet on one of several deer horns attached to the wall by the door. "This is a lovely calash," Catherine said admiring the bonnet as she hung it. "I would like to have one made just like it."

Artis smiled, pleased at the compliment. "Mr. Cotter asked that ye bar the door while he takes care of my horse."

When Catherine stepped toward the door, Artis said, "Please, allow me to do it."

When she finished, Catherine took her into the front room furnished with several pieces of finely made furniture and an extremely large dining table at the back of the room.

Artis gazed across the spacious room that looked and smelled warm and welcoming. Two unlit silver candelabras graced both ends of the dining table and garland, bedecked with ribbons and red

berries, hung over the window as well as a cabinet filled with fine china and crystal. A wreath fashioned from greenery and wild berries hung over the large superbly made mantel. And pleasant scents permeated the home—the oak burning in the sizeable hearth, pine garlands, and something baking in the kitchen.

Catherine motioned toward a large chair by the hearth. “Please, sit down in Sam’s chair. The fire will warm you quickly.”

“Thank ye,” Artis said as she sank wearily into the chair. She leaned her tired back against the big comfortable chair, already feeling at home. “Yer house is magnificent. I particularly love the mantel and the holiday wreath above. That mantel resembles the one Bear made for our own home.”

Catherine smiled faintly as she took a chair herself. “It should. Bear made that mantel.”

Artis chuckled. No wonder she liked the mantel. “Your home looks quite festive.”

“I wish I felt festive, but thank you. I enjoy decorating for the Christmas season.” Catherine stood. “I’ll just go ask Mrs. Wrigley to fix a plate of food for you.”

“Nay, there’s na need. I’ll wait until we can all eat together,” Artis said. “But some coffee and a wee biscuit would be most welcome for now.”

Catherine disappeared for a few moments and then returned and slowly eased into what looked like her own chair. “Mrs. Wrigley will be out shortly with your refreshments. Did you have bags with you?”

“Aye. Mr. Cotter said he would bring them in soon.”

“I’m glad Sam left Garvin to stand guard. I feel better knowing he’s out there.” Catherine winced a bit and then leaned back in her chair and placed a hand on her right side. “The midwife says I’m going to have a big boy.”

“How blessed ye will feel with two sons,” Artis said.

At the mention of two sons, Catherine’s eyes watered. “Oh Artis, I’m so worried for Little John. Nothing like this has ever happened before. We’ve only had him for a little more than two years, but I love him so much.”

“I can see that Catherine, to be sure. I could also tell how much Sam loves the lad. Bear was quite distressed too when your husband told us what happened. He’s been lookin’ forward to seein’ Little John again for weeks.” Artis smiled. “Bear loves the wee lad.”

Catherine nodded. “Little John and Bear are quite close.”

“Is there anythin’ I can do for ye?” Artis asked. “I wanted to go with them to help find Little John, but Sam asked me to come and stay with ye.”

“He’s worried sick about me. I fear my husband will not relax until I’ve delivered and he’s holding our babe in his arms. Even then, he’ll probably fret over the child day and night.”

Artis grinned at Catherine and wondered if Bear would be the same way some day.

Garvin knocked and called out, “It’s Garvin, Mrs. Wyllie.”

“Allow me,” Artis said, and sprang up to unbar and open the door.

Garvin quickly sat the bags inside. “I’ll get back to guard duty now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cotter,” Artis said and rebarred the door before turning back to Catherine.

“I’ll have Miss Henk put those in Bear’s room later,” Catherine said.

“Bear still has a room here?”

“Indeed, he will always have a room here. He’s family and he helped build this house,” Catherine answered. “Now, that room belongs to both of you.”

Catherine’s welcoming words warmed Artis’ heart. “Thank ye for yer hospitality.”

“I would be more hospitable were I not so terribly worried,” Catherine said, swallowing and then blinking away the tears that threatened. “Forgive me, I should have offered to take you to your room. You must be exhausted. Would you like to go lie down and rest awhile?”

“Nay, ‘tis quite comfortable here by the fire. I’m finally warmin’ up.”

“Oh, Mrs. Wrigley, thank you,” Catherine said, as the cook sat the tray on the low table that sat between the two women. “This is Artis MacKay, Bear’s new wife.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. MacKay. Bear certainly found himself a lovely wife indeed!” Mrs. Wrigley said with a kind smile. “While you’re staying with us, please just ask for anything you might need or like. If I can’t help you, the housekeeper, Miss Henk will. She’s resting just now. Like Mrs. Wyllie and me, she’s terribly upset about little Mister John being lost in the forest.”

Artis hoped the child was just lost. Then the men could find him, frightened perhaps, but probably unharmed.

But as she well knew, wild woods contained many perils. And at night, danger could quickly become terror.

Chapter 11

Growing increasingly uneasy, Sam's heart quavered with worry for Little John. As his men hollered Little John's name over and over, old fears whispered inside his head. *When you love someone you can lose them.*

But his heart refused to listen to the whispers. He would find their son.

The sight of Bear once again riding beside him gave him hope. "Why did you arrive early?" he asked, looking over at Bear. For the first time, he noticed his brother's clean-shaven face and that his dark red hair hung far shorter.

"'Twas na happenstance. I had a feelin' I might be needed," Bear answered. "After Breedhead told me about those three strangers, I had to come. William and his family are coming early too. Was I right, did the three bring trouble?"

"Indeed. I killed one of them. Although I only meant to wound him. The man raised his weapon and pointed it at me so I shot back, but his horse moved."

"Why did the fool point a weapon at ye?" Bear asked.

"I guess he didn't like hearing me refuse to sign over my land back home."

"Why would they want it that much? After the mountain slide that killed yer parents and sister, God rest their sweet souls, there's na much left but the mountain."

"They said they wanted it to quarry rock. But, let's talk about this later. Right now, we need to focus on finding my son."

"Aye. But perhaps the two are related."

Sam rode in silence for a moment or two, his mind searching for a plausible connection. Then, realization struck. "If you're right, those

two bastards have my son." As soon as he uttered the words, he knew why. He eyed Bear, alarm filling him at the disturbing thought.

"Aye. I suspect they plan to use the lad to force you to sign. They want to exchange Little John for the deed."

"I'll kill the bastards, inch by inch, if they harm my boy," Sam swore.

"Until we know for sure, let's just hope the lad is lost," Bear said.

His brother was trying to ease Sam's worries, but Sam recognized the truth when he heard it. He needed to find Little John and soon.

"There, that stand of pines." Sam pointed to the woods on the other side of the meadow and then slowed his horse to a stop. He turned Alex around to face his men. "Bear and I will ride ahead on the trail that Little John and I normally take. Harry, I want you to take the southern end of that copse of trees. James, you take the middle. And Mathew, you cover the northern end. If any of you find him, fire one shot into the air. And be listening for Garvin's weapon too. I told him to do the same if Little John comes home. If Garvin fires two shots, that means Catherine needs me."

"Understood, Captain," James said.

"Anything could have happened to him—from a fall to a wild animal. But Bear and I think there is a strong possibility that those men from this morning kidnapped Little John to force me to sign over my New Hampshire land. So be careful and keep an eye out for Dixon and Crowell too. Hopefully, my son is just lost. Keep calling his name and scanning the forest. He's wearing his brown coat and a red shirt," Sam said. "When you get into the woods, light your torches. Now, help me bring my boy home."

"Yes, Sir," the three men said before they took off in their respective directions.

As soon as his men left, Sam dismounted and lit his torch with his flint. "With the sky full of clouds, there's not enough moon to let us see anything. Hopefully this torch will help."

"Perhaps I can spot a print in a patch of snow," Bear said. "Is Little John riding Dan?"

"No, he's on foot," Sam answered. He wished the boy was riding the horse Little John named after Daniel Boone. At least then his feet

wouldn't freeze.

The two started out leading their horses and calling Little John's name repeatedly.

Bear followed closely, a horse length or two behind him for a long while, before his brother finally spoke. "Sam, come back here. Look, I think that's his wee boot print there in the snow. And here's another."

Sam whirled around, and hurriedly tied Alex to a nearby bush. Rushing toward Bear, he spotted a boot print too. "Here's another. From the length between, I'd say he was running."

"Agreed," Bear said. "But from what?"

He looked into Bear's eyes and saw the same worry and urgency that filled him. If something or someone was chasing Little John, he could be hurt. If he was injured, they had to find him soon or he would freeze to death in this weather. As if in warning, he felt a snowflake on his face, then another, and another. Both men scowled as they peered up and then grimaced when the wind began to whine.

"Tie your horse Bear and help me find more tracks," Sam said. "We've got to hurry."

The two proceeded on foot, and every now and then found a boot print in the snow. Finally, the prints stopped and the hoof prints of two horses were clearly visible.

"It looks as though Little John turned in a circle several times," Sam said, his fingers probing the boot prints. "He must have been looking for a way to get past the two."

"I bet 'tis the two blackhearts that wanted yer land!" Bear growled.

He prayed it wasn't so, but somehow he knew it was. A sudden chill filled Sam that had nothing at all to do with the snow coming down. "Those bastards!" He spat the words out, seething with fury.

The two men, particularly Dixon, did seem overly anxious to get Sam to sell. It was more than the thousand miles they'd traveled to find him. There had to be another reason. What could make them so determined and brash? Kidnapping a child, particularly from a man with four hired hands, was a heinous and desperate act.

Bear scowled and his nostrils flared with fury. “I’ll sever their heads from their worthless bodies if they harm a hair on the wee lad’s head.”

“They think to exchange the deed for Little John’s life,” Sam snarled. “But we’ll see that they lose their lives instead.”

“What kind of a devil’s spawn would use a wee boy like that?”

“The kind we’re going to find.” Through clenched teeth, Sam ripped out each word. He fired one of his flintlocks into the air, releasing some of his pent up anger and recalling his men. “Get our horses,” he told Bear. “I’ll follow the tracks of these two horses before the snow covers them up!”

Bear spun around and jogged toward the horses.

Carrying the torch, Sam took off on foot, moving as swiftly as he could without losing sight of the tracks. Their prints led through the trees in a northerly direction. Where were the two bastards taking Little John? He looked up when Mathew rode up from the right. “We found Little John’s boot print, and then those of two horses. I’m following those. Bear went back for my horse,” he told his man.

Carrying his own torch, Mathew peered down. “There, I see the hoof prints now.” He stepped his horse a few yards ahead of the tracks. “Look, they lead in that direction. Want me to follow them?”

“Yes! We’ve got to hurry before the snow conceals them forever.”

Mathew took off at once, his eyes trained on the ground.

Sam turned behind him. Bear and the two other men were hurrying his way. The rage within him grew by the minute. He whirled around again to see where Mathew was. He could just make out a spot of light in the darkness. He turned back to face the approaching men. “Hurry!” he shouted.

Bear loped up and tossed him Alex’s reins.

Sam leapt onto the gelding and booted the horse’s sides. “Let’s go!”

Within a few moments, they’d caught up to Mathew.

“I’ll track from here,” Bear said. He grabbed the torch from Mathew and took off.

Bear was a superb tracker and his night vision was exceptional so Sam let his brother take the lead following the trail.

“Keep your eyes open,” he told the others. “Two men have my boy and I mean to find them.”

The five rode quietly, not knowing what they might come upon. Other than the sound of their horse’s movements, the only other noise came from the wind, now laden with snow. With every minute, the flakes multiplied, becoming heavier and wetter, and the air grew colder. Soon, the wind grew stronger and the torches went out.

“Damn, of all times for a blizzard,” Sam yelled over the battering gusts of wind. Furious and frustrated, his breaths grew rapid and ragged.

Thankfully, Bear trudged on, despite the conditions. How his brother could see anything in this near blizzard was beyond Sam. Snow now coated Bear’s broad back, as his brother leaned down to view the ground as best he could.

“Captain, perhaps we should spread out again,” James suggested.

“No, we run the risk of getting lost ourselves in these conditions. Just let Bear keep trying.”

For what seemed like an hour, but was probably less than half that, they kept on, until Bear abruptly stopped and sat up straight. All the snow that had accumulated on his back dropped across the hips of Bear’s horse.

His brother turned around and faced him, his square jaw visibly tensed. Bear’s face, reddened by the temperature and wind, grew grim as he told Sam what he already knew.

“That’s the end. Na more trackin’ tonight.”

“Bloody hell!” Sam replied, his chin thrust forward.

He would *not* give up.

Two rifle shots rang out behind them, faint but distinct.

Chapter 12

Sam could only whisper the ominous words. “Two shots.”

His mind raced. He had to go back. But Little John needed him and the thought of abandoning the search caused a sinking feeling in his stomach.

“That means Mrs. Wyllie needs you,” Mathew said.

“I know what it means,” Sam growled, under his breath. *It meant something is wrong. A warning.*

Should he ask Bear and his men to continue searching? If they got lost in this storm, the results could be disastrous. Since Bear had lived and hunted here for a year, he was familiar with the terrain, but none of them knew the area as well as Sam did.

“Brother!”

Bear’s voice drew Sam from his agonizing thoughts and he looked up.

“We can na track any further tonight. The conditions are worsenin’ by the minute. Let’s go back, we’ll start out again in the morn, at first light,” Bear said.

“I don’t want my son spending the night with those two bastards!” he swore. He didn’t want to even give voice to his most troublesome worry, that Dixon and Crowell might kill Little John.

“They will na harm Little John. If they want to get ye to sign, they have to keep him alive,” Bear said. “And I doubt they would hurt him and unleash yer wrath again. They’ve already seen it once.”

“Let’s go!” He urged Alex to move as swiftly as the horse could in this blizzard, which wasn’t nearly as fast as he wished. But they weren’t too far away from home. They would be there soon. *God, please, keep Catherine safe*. What could have happened? If they needed the midwife, how would they get her in this weather?

As soon as they arrived, Sam leapt from his horse. Bear did the same. He didn't see Garvin anywhere, but a gray horse stood tied outside. "Dixon's," he snarled. "Tie your horses and then wait here under the porch," Sam told his men. "But stay away from the window."

They drew their weapons—Sam his long knife and Bear his hatchet. He threw open the door. Bear followed and hurriedly shut it against the snowstorm.

At the sight before them, Sam stiffened.

Dixon sat calmly in Sam's chair, until he caught sight of Bear. Taking in Bear's intimidating presence, he sat up straighter and placed a hand on his pistol.

Sam glanced over at Catherine, fearful that this might all be too much for her in her condition. But she stood beside Artis, tall and dignified, a pistol in her hand. She appeared unharmed, although her eyes blazed with fury.

Marching over to Dixon, Sam glared daggers down at the man. "What the hell is going on here? Do you have my son?" He swiftly touched the tip of his knife to Dixon's throat.

At the touch of Sam's long blade, the man swallowed. But even with multiple weapons pointed at him, a self-satisfied smirk still covered Dixon's face. His greasy skin glistened in the light of the hearth fire. "I do have your son, Captain. But you and your wife will get him back soon enough."

Artis' hair appeared disheveled and she clutched a dirk in her hand. One of her arms lay protectively across Catherine's belly. "This bastard would only speak with ye, Sam," Artis said, her voice hot and her face flushed.

"He won't tell me where Little John is," Catherine told him. "I begged him to tell me, but he refused!"

Sam could see her struggling to be strong, yet her voice nearly broke.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wyllie," Garvin said, the pistol held in his hand still pointing at Dixon. "He asked to speak to you or Mrs. Wyllie about Little John. He said it was a matter of life or death, so I checked with Mrs. Wyllie and she wanted to speak with him. After she and Mrs.

MacKay both held their weapons, I let him in. Then I went outside and fired the two shots to recall you and the others."

"You did fine, Garvin," Sam said. He needed to keep his emotions under control. Little John's life now depended on it. It was time for him to think like a soldier again. Time to assess the situation and find out what motivated his enemy. He gave Dixon a hard look and made his voice threatening, "Where is my son, you bastard, and why did you take him?"

"My partner has the boy in a secure location. He'll be returned to you just as soon as you cooperate," Dixon said in a smooth voice.

"And just how is my brother to cooperate?" Bear demanded, stomping toward Dixon. "And get out of the Captain's chair!"

Dixon didn't move.

Bear reached down with his free hand, grabbed a fistful of Dixon's waistcoat, and threw him against the hearth. "I asked ye to move yer arse," Bear hissed into the man's face.

"Let's be civilized about this," Dixon said, putting both palms up before Bear could hit him.

"Ye take my nephew and then talk to me about being civilized!" Bear roared and then punched Dixon in his stomach.

Bear delivered the blow with so much force, the man bent double, then struggled for a breath as he slowly straightened.

"Hold on. There's no…need to…resort to violence," Dixon gasped, holding his belly. He took a few deep breaths and looked intently at Sam. "In fact, if I'm harmed, you will never see that annoying little brat again. I've instructed my partner to kill him if I'm not back by noon tomorrow. He'll be keeping a watch out for us and if I appear harmed, he's to slit the boy's throat and shoot you from a distance, Captain."

That did it. Sam pushed Bear aside and slammed his fist into Dixon's jaw like a sudden bolt of lightning. When Dixon straightened, he pulled his knife and with a deadly glare growled, "Another threat like that and it's *your* throat that will get slit, with this!" He pressed his blade against Dixon's quivering Adam's apple.

Dixon winced and a trickle of blood dripped onto the man's dirty cravat.

“Have you harmed my son in any way?” he snarled through clenched teeth.

“No, no,” Dixon quickly blurted. “He’s perfectly fine, aside from having to tie the little spitfire’s hands and feet to keep him from kicking and punching us.”

Sam scrutinized the man’s eyes to be certain he spoke the truth. He always measured truth by a man’s eyes not his words. So Little John hadn’t made it easy on the two men. That didn’t surprise him. He removed his knife from the kidnapper’s throat and took a slow step back, continuing to glare at Dixon. “Bear, inform the other three men that we’ll see them in the morning, but tell them to be prepared to ride out early. For now, they need to get to their quarters in the barn.” Sam pointed with his knife. Instead of pointing in the direction of the barn, he pointed to the rear of the house. Hopefully, Bear would understand his meaning.

“No, your men can’t come with you in the morning. Just you, Captain,” Dixon said, placing a handkerchief against the bleeding nick on his throat.

With deceptive calm, Sam told Bear, “Just tell the men what I said.”

Bear turned and went out onto the porch for a moment. The tension in the room became palatable and only increased when Bear came back in, snarling like a real cornered bear. “Do ye want me to start breaking his fingers, Captain? I bet we’d know where Little John is by the time I got to his second hand.”

He gave Bear a telling look. “Bear, why don’t you go into the kitchen and get yourself a cup of coffee. You’ve had a long ride getting here.”

Sam watched, fighting his own battle of restraint, as Bear left the room. He turned back to Dixon. He wanted to tear Dixon apart and then toss him to the wolves in the nearby forest. But he and Bear needed to outsmart, not outfight, this arrogant bastard.

Catherine stepped forward. “We have to do as he says. We can’t risk them hurting our son.”

Sam sheathed his knife, went to her, and gently took her arm. “Sit down, Catherine, please,” he said, directing her to her chair.

Catherine did as he asked, but turned toward Dixon. “Sir, I am a wealthy woman. I will pay you twice whatever your employer is offering to acquire this land from my husband.”

Dixon smirked at her. “Thank you little lady, but no.”

Sam smoldered, again thinking about pummeling Dixon to shreds, but clenched his hands into fists instead. Long ago, he’d learn to unleash his temper only when it served his purpose.

Bear returned from the kitchen, holding a cup.

Dixon turned to Sam. “Captain Wyllie. This is actually very straightforward. Simply sign over your deed and tomorrow morning I will lead you to Little John. We’ll exchange the deed for the boy and my partner and I will be on our way back to New Hampshire. It’s just that simple.”

When deceitful people say something is simple, they are usually hiding a far more complicated truth. Sam hardened his voice. “And what do you propose to do in the meantime. Sit in my chair all night?”

“If that will suit you. It suits me. It’s quite comfortable here and I’m finally warming up,” Dixon said, haughtily taking a seat in Sam’s chair once again.

Bear snarled at the man and stepped toward Dixon looking like he was about to toss the hot coffee in the man’s face.

“Let’s oblige him for now,” Sam said, throwing another revealing glance at Bear.

Sam silently vowed to make this man pay dearly for his arrogance.

“Catherine, please take Artis to Bear’s room. She is undoubtedly exhausted,” he instructed. He sent them to Bear’s room because it was the furthest away.

Catherine stood, gave Dixon a contemptuous look, turned, and took Artis’ elbow.

Artis’ eyes conveyed the fury within her, but she went with Catherine.

Dixon settled more comfortably in the chair, stretched out his

legs and crossed his arms over his belly, and then closed his eyes.

Sam waited until he heard the door to Bear's room open and close before he silently motioned Garvin over to him. Leaving Bear guarding Dixon, they stepped into the hall, and he spoke to Garvin in a hushed whisper. "Watch him well. Call me if he even farts. Under no circumstances is he to leave this room. And don't be concerned if you hear noise in the kitchen. It's our men."

"Understood, Captain."

The two returned to the front room.

"Bear, with me," Sam said. Taking long strides, he led them down the hall to Bear's room and closed the door behind him.

The three gathered around him. "What's the plan Sam?" Bear asked, keeping his voice low. "I'd gladly kill the bloody bastard for ye if only we knew where they were hidin' Little John."

"What's this all about Sam?" Catherine asked. "Surely there must be more to it if he refused my offer."

"'Tis clear this is na just about quarryin' rock," Bear said.

"Agreed. Hell, half of New Hampshire is rock. I believe there's another reason they want the mountain. Several years ago, a farmer in Andover, not too far from my land, had a few tons of rock on his property analyzed. They found small amounts of gold. Area farmers started bringing in mining equipment from all over. The so called gold-rush ended just as quickly as it began. But perhaps there *is* gold in my mountain. That must be what this is about. With the country's new currency system, the Department of the Treasury will need a supply of both gold and silver mined here in the colonies."

Bear nodded. "Aye, I read in the Kentucky Gazette that the Coinage Act called for ninety percent silver alloy in coins and ninety percent gold alloy in eagle coins. The government is aggressively seekin' sources for both."

Sam nodded in agreement, amazed at how scholarly Bear often was. "That's right. I suspect that whoever sent these men here, offered them a percentage of all sales to the government. It could mean a fortune for a lifetime if there really is gold there."

"Or even if 'tis only silver," Bear added.

“Sam, please, just sign the deed over to him and make the exchange,” Catherine pleaded. “We can’t risk Little John’s life.”

“I would, willingly, but I can’t trust Dixon to keep his word,” he answered. “Trying to get the truth out of that man is like trying to get a dead man to confess.”

“Aye, ye can na trust a blackguard such as him to do as he says. They might just be plannin’ to cover their tracks by killin’ the lad *and* ambushin’ all of ye,” Artis agreed.

Catherine gasped and Sam saw a flash of fear rip through her.

“I’m not going to let that happen, Artis,” he said firmly. He turned to Catherine. “Are the housekeeper and cook asleep?”

She shook her head. “I doubt that they are, but I told them to remain in their room until either you or I asked them to come out.”

Sam turned to Bear. “Did tell the men to sneak in the back and wait in the kitchen? And unbar the kitchen door when I sent you to get coffee?”

“Aye, I was hopin’ I understood ye correctly. ‘Twas the most logical thing for us to do, given the circumstances,” Bear said. “Yer men are there and awaitin’ yer instructions.”

“But ye told Bear to tell them ye’d see them in the morn,” Artis said, sounding confused.

“Aye, but he did it with his left hand fisted behind his back. That’s our signal to do the opposite,” Bear explained. “We dreamed up a secret hand code when we were all wee lads. It has come in handy more than once. And I knew he wanted me to bring the men in through the rear when he pointed his knife that direction instead of toward the barn.”

“Clever,” Artis said. “When this is all over, ye must teach us that code.”

“Sam, what’s near here? Any caves? Abandoned cabins? Anyplace they could hide Little John?” Bear asked.

Sam’s mind raced. “Yes! I’d forgotten. There’s an old beaver trapper’s cabin about two miles from here, off the road heading north. They could have stumbled upon it while hunting food. Perhaps they spent the night there before they came here this morning. When I

turned them down, they must have waited in the woods for Little John to come out and play, then followed him out of sight to where we tracked him. I bet if we'd been able to continue, the tracks would have led straight to the cabin."

"Aye," Bear agreed.

"Now if the weather will just cooperate." He peered out Bear's window. Thankfully, only a light dusting of snow now fell and the wind appeared to have calmed. "Looks far better out there. Catherine, I want you to go to bed just as you always do, and try to rest. Call out 'good night' to Artis before you shut your door. Artis, you do the same, loud enough for Dixon to hear."

Both women nodded their understanding.

"Catherine, please trust me. I *will* find him. I promise," he said.

Tears glistened on his wife's pale face. "Oh Sam, bring our son back."

Sam placed one hand on her shoulder and the other palm over her bulging belly. "I'll take care of Little John. You take care of this little one."

She smiled up at him. A tear slipped from her dark lashes, but she seemed consoled by their plan and a little more hopeful. "Stay safe, Sam."

"Artis, ye should get some rest too. Ye look like yer about to drop," Bear said.

She appeared reluctant to admit her weariness, but said, "Aye, I am tired."

Bear turned to Sam. "We had little sleep. We only stopped for a wee rest gettin' here."

"Both of you keep the doors to your rooms locked," Sam said.

"What are you two going to do?" Catherine asked, sniffling a little.

"Bear and I will go tie Dixon up, remove his weapons, and then step into the kitchen and make coffee," he explained. "While the coffee's brewing, I'll have Garvin stable and feed Dixon's horse. His mount looks near frozen." Whatever animosity he felt toward Dixon,

he would not let the animal suffer for it.

"Then what?" Catherine and Artis both asked at the same time.

"We can't both leave," Sam quietly told Bear. "I want you and Garvin to stay here. Dixon may have more men out there that we don't know about that lie in wait. They could be planning to attack the house on Dixon's signal."

"Aye," Bear agreed.

"After I take a few sips of coffee, I'll make Dixon think I'm going to bed for a while and putting you on first watch. You stay in the front room with Garvin and guard the bastard well. I'll sneak out the back door with my men. We'll go to the cabin. If Little John is there, we'll rescue him and bring Dixon's partner back too, *if* the man is still alive. If I have to kill him, I will."

"'Tis a sound plan," Bear said.

Sam turned to Catherine. "When we get back, I'll sneak Little John in through the back door and then let you know he's safe."

"What if the lad is na there?" Artis asked. "What if they have him hidden somewhere else like a cave?"

"Then we have na lost anythin' but time," Bear answered.

"This *is* going to work. I can feel it," Catherine said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"It has to," Sam said. "My son needs me. I will not fail him."

Chapter 13

Sam and Harry, James, and Mathew, led their horses single file as they trudged through the fresh snow, trying to be as quiet as possible. He took them well away from the house before he turned back toward the road. As soon as he thought it was safe, they remounted and headed north on the road that led away from their land.

Snow, ice, hidden rocks, and frozen ground would make the trek to the cabin challenging. About a half foot of snow lay on the ground, deeper in some places. But the horses began growing their winter coats as soon as the days grew shorter, long before the full force of winter set in, so they were already well protected. And their farm work had made the mounts well-muscled and strong enough to plunge their hooves through snow to gain traction.

Sam's horses had carried him through much worse in New Hampshire. But, in difficult conditions like this, it was best to let a horse set his own pace. Thankfully, Alex kept moving steadily forward without slowing and the other horses kept up. It wouldn't be long and they would near the cabin.

Over the years, he came to trust a horse's sharp instinct for sensing danger too. When a horse hesitated to move forward, it usually meant something was wrong. A man who didn't listen to his horse put them both in peril.

He also learned to trust his own keen instincts. Intuition is a sacred gift to the warrior. And everyone else facing danger. Now, when Little John's life depended on him making the right decisions, it would be even more important. When he listened to his soul, his good instincts often told him what to do long before his mind could figure it out.

He turned his head back toward the three men that followed. "Stay quiet. Noise travels a long way at night and we don't want to alert the man. By the way, his name is Thomas Crowell." Like Bear, he made a point to remember the names of his enemies.

"Yes Sir," the three men all replied in soft voices.

As he rode, Sam tried not to worry. He wanted to keep his mind clear and calm. When they neared the cabin, he would need to come up with a plan that would not jeopardize Little John. He gazed ahead, grateful that the snowstorm carried the dark clouds away and the cool-white rays of the moon could now light their way. It was almost as though God Himself held a lantern above their heads.

Lord, continue to guide me as I seek to find my son.

At the same moment he finished his entreaty to God, he spotted a part of a body lying face down in the snow a short distance away. A snow bank kept him from seeing the entire form. "Little John?" His mind screamed with panic.

No! It can't be.

He raced Alex over to the prone figure his heart in his throat. He let out a long breath when he realized the body was that of a full grown man. Bill White. The man's companions literally tossed him to the wolves and coyotes instead of burying him. Dixon and Crowell were men of the worst sort.

Sam turned to his three men who had followed him to the spot. "One of you can come back tomorrow and bury what's left of him."

The four returned to the winding path leading to the cabin. The night ride held hidden natural beauty. In spots, ice patches appeared infused with moonlight and the snow glistened as though nature sprinkled the trail and the bushes along it with tiny stars. But Sam's mind stayed focused on Little John. He was certain his son would find strength from within during this ordeal. Strength was in his Wyllie blood. And the trials of life already forced the child to mature beyond his eight years.

Yet Little John was only a boy and must be frightened, even terrified. The thought hardened the muscles on Sam's face. He straightened his back. Thomas Crowell would not know what hit him. It would likely be Sam's fist. Or his knife, if the man resisted. His fingers, numb with cold, gripped the reins in his hand even tighter.

He finally saw a tiny glow of light just before he smelled the faint scent of a fire burning in the cabin's hearth. With each step of the horses, the light grew larger and the scent grew stronger until at last he held up a hand, halting the others. "We'll tie the horses and walk

from here," he whispered. "Take your rifles in case we need them, although your pistols will be of more use inside the cabin. I assume all of you put fresh powder in your weapons before we left?"

The three nodded and dismounted, rifles in hand. They fell in line and followed behind Sam, as he carefully maneuvered them around any fallen logs or brush that might make noise. The snow made their progress slow, but they soon found themselves about fifty yards away from the old cabin's front door.

He crouched down low behind a bush and studied the rustic structure. There were no windows. A cabin this tiny would have only one way in and one way out. A trapper built this cabin to provide a shelter only a little better than a tent. Considerable smoke drifted up from the rock chimney. If this is where Crowell was hiding Little John, at least his son was reasonably warm.

He needed to confirm that Crowell was indeed inside. He could see the hip of a horse tied to the other side of the cabin. "Follow me," he told the others. Sam silently maneuvered to a spot where he could get a clear view of the horse. It was indeed the same mount the man rode this morning—a tall bay with black stockings and tail. And tied next to it stood a shorter sorrel, the mount rode by Bill White.

They had found them.

He turned to his men and whispered, "It's Crowell's horse."

"What now, Captain?" James asked.

"The most important thing is to be sure Little John doesn't get hurt. It's a small cabin so it will be difficult for all of us to not get in each other's way or line of sight. So, Harry and Mathew, I want you two to focus solely on Little John. Grab him and take him outside, no matter what is happening. James, you'll go in first and fast. Use your brawn to tackle Crowell. I'll be right behind you and have my pistol pointed at him ready to shoot if Crowell even tries to draw a weapon. Be exceedingly quiet as you approach. Our best weapon is surprise. Understood?"

They all nodded and, James whispered, "I can't wait to take the bloody bastard down."

"We'll take good care of your son," Harry said. "We love him too."

Sam gave Harry and Mathew a reassuring pat on their shoulders. “I’m grateful for your help, gentlemen.” Then he nodded his thanks to James.

Moving slowly and carefully, they came up well to the right side of the cabin. Sam wanted to stay out of sight in case Crowell opened the door to relieve himself. When they were even with the front of the shelter, he leaned his long rifle against the cabin. The weapon would just get in the way inside. He drew one of his pistols and shuffled closer, keeping his back snug against the rough logs on the cabin’s right front side. The other three propped their rifles up as well and then advanced forward, as he had.

Sam listened for a moment. Not hearing anything, he motioned for James to move ahead of him. He followed, immediately behind James, and the other two stayed close to Sam’s back. They quietly inched forward until the cabin door was beside them.

James eyed Sam with determination on his face.

Sam nodded to go ahead. A heartbeat later, they were inside and Crowell’s wide eyes peered up, shock on his whiskered face.

Crowell sat at an undersized table. Before the man could even stand up, James flew at the kidnapper like a vicious dog beset on overcoming a cornered animal. Crowell’s chair and back slammed against the dirt floor.

Sam charged forward and pointed his pistol at Crowell’s head.

In another heartbeat, James sat astride Crowell and his knees pinned the kidnapper to ground. Then James raised his fist about to slam it across the man’s jaw.

“Don’t hit him,” Sam yelled, stopping the fist mid-swing.

With Crowell overpowered, Sam took the time to glance up and see the other two men carrying Little John through the door. He let out a long breath when he realized his son appeared to be all right.

He turned back and stared down at his son’s abductor. “Get up!” he ordered.

James appeared reluctant to stop his assault on Crowell, and Sam couldn’t blame him.

James finally stood and Crowell scrambled up, looking somewhat

dazed. “Don’t kill me,” he pleaded. “I was just doing what Dixon ordered me to do.”

“Are you both soldiers?” Sam asked, knowing the answer.

Crowell shook his head no.

“Then you had no reason to follow his orders. Get moving.” Sam motioned toward the door with one of his pistols.

When they all stood outside in the moonlight, Harry and Mathew reclaimed their rifles and pointed the weapons at Crowell. James stood by fists still clenched at his sides. The kidnapper just stood there, his body slumped, staring at his feet.

Sam sheathed his pistols and hurried over to where Little John sat on the ground.

“Little John!” He knelt in front of his son and quickly untied the bindings on the boy’s hands and feet. Hot fury filled him when he noticed large patches of red skin rubbed raw by the rope on his son’s small wrists. The sight made his jaw clench and his breath burn hot in his throat.

As soon as his hands and feet were freed, Little John’s arms flew around Sam’s neck and his son clung to him tighter than ever before. “Pa, I knew you would come for me.”

Little John finally released his neck, but left his hands resting on Sam’s shoulders. He could see his son struggling not to cry.

Sam gave him another hug and then stood. Taking one of the child’s hands, the two faced Crowell. “I don’t know what the penalty is in this state for kidnapping and extortion, but you and your scheming partner will soon find out.” He let go of Little John’s hand and stomped closer to Crowell.

He could no longer restrain the ferocity of his wrath. He snarled through gritted teeth, “Until then, this will just have to do.” With all the force his right arm could deliver, he clobbered the kidnapper’s face.

Crowell’s head snapped back and he cried out in pain, his nose bleeding and undoubtedly broken. But the vicious blow wasn’t enough to appease Sam’s pent up fury. He gave into his rage and struck the bastard again, this time under the jaw, with his left fist.

That blow sent Crowell sprawling on his back. “Don’t let him kill me,” he whined pathetically, his eyes searching frantically for help from Sam’s men.

Still fuming, Sam glared down at Crowell, then over at Little John. “Did they hurt you?”

Little John swallowed hard. “They warned me that they would cut the bottoms of my feet if I tried to run away, but they didn’t ‘cuz I didn’t try.”

The bastards! How dare they threaten his son with such barbarity? He didn’t know if it was true or just a frontier rumor, but Sam had heard reports of Indians doing that to a white child they’d captured to make the bottoms of his feet so sore he couldn’t run away. Dixon must have heard the same story.

He glowered at Crowell. With fists clenched, he took a step toward the cowering man.

“I didn’t say that. It was Dixon,” Crowell protested. “He threatened the boy and planned everything.”

“When you wallow with pigs, expect to get dirty,” Sam sneered.

He turned his attention back to Little John. “Anything else?”

Little John squared his little shoulders. “Mostly they just tried to scare me. But I don’t scare easy!”

“Tie him!” Sam ordered. “Before I beat the filthy swine to death.” The thought was sorely tempting.

Mathew stepped inside to find something that would serve to bind the man’s wrists together.

Eyes glaring, Little John scowled at Crowell himself. “He took my knife and my rifle. I want them back!”

Despite his anger, Sam was amused. “Let’s go find your weapons. And your coat.”

“May I have my coat too,” Crowell begged. He was still sitting in the snow, shivering and moaning.

Sam eyed the man with contempt. He was tempted to let frostbite be part of his punishment. “I’ll find it. Only because you need to live

long enough for due justice to be served."

When he and Little John entered the tiny cabin, Mathew held up a long coil of rough rawhide. "This should serve."

"Grab his coat there too," Sam instructed. "After his hands and feet are tied, throw him over his saddle face down, and then tie him to his horse. And one of you will need to lead the dead man's horse. We can pick up his body on the way home."

"I'll tie both swine on well," Mathew said as he left, leaving Sam and his son alone in the cabin.

Kneeling, he took hold of both of Little John's hands again. "You've been through a tough experience Little John. You've been brave, but it's okay to cry if you need to."

"No, I was scared, real scared, because I didn't know why they took me. I knew you would come for me, but I didn't know if you could find me here."

"I will always be there when you need me. And if I'm not right in front of you, I'll be right here, inside your heart." Sam tapped his son's chest. "Remember that."

"I will Pa."

"Are you still worried or scared?"

"No, not now. I'm just happy."

"I am too, son." He wrapped his arms around his boy and hugged him tightly.

Then they found Little John's knife, rifle, powder and ball pouch, and his coat. Sam got him bundled and buttoned against the cold. Then he snuffed out the fire with the sand bucket, gathered up Crowell's weapons, and they went outside.

"Our horses are a fair ways off. Climb on my back and I'll carry you. The snow's too deep for you."

He crouched down and Little John climbed up onto his back.

God had blessed him with a strong body, broad shoulders, and well-muscled back, so carrying his son for a distance would pose no problem. In fact, it felt good to feel Little John resting safely against

him, heart to heart.

“I love you, Pa.”

Sam had to swallow his emotions a few times before he could speak. “I love you too, son.”

Chapter 14

Sam's feet felt like twin blocks of ice and his numb fingers required painful attempts at thawing by clenching and unclenching his hand. The trip back, riding tired and cold horses, seemed to take forever. Little John fell asleep, facing his chest, and sitting in front of him. The boy's body warmth was welcome, but far more than that, it warmed his heart knowing his son was now safe.

As before, he led them quietly through the woods and then to the rear of the large barn before they dismounted. He wanted to surprise Dixon.

Before dismounting, Sam pointed to Crowell. "Put that bastard in the stall with the most horseshit and chain him in it."

Little John still slept and, after carefully dismounting, he gently laid his son on a pile of fresh hay off to the side. The boy's fair skin, light hair, and delicate features made him think he was looking at the face of a cherub. For sure, he gazed upon a precious gift of God. A gift given to both him and Catherine.

While the other men tended to their weary mounts too, he unsaddled Alex and then covered the gelding with a dry sheet to absorb moisture and walked the horse around the snug barn. The frigid temperature they'd endured made it important for the horse to cool gradually. He finished with a quick brushing. "Will you feed and water him for me Harry? I need to take Little John inside."

"Of course," Harry responded, taking Alex's lead rope.

"You men get some rest and get warm, but wait a bit before you go to your quarters. It won't be long before Garvin brings Dixon out to join our prisoner. Keep them both locked up until I say otherwise."

He scooped Little John up, trying not to wake him, and placed his son's head over a shoulder. Then he grabbed his long rifle and hurried towards his home's back door. As he hiked through the snow, he glanced up at the sky, now filled with piercingly bright stars and

whispered, “Thank you, Lord.”

Sam opened and then closed the door slowly. As he made his way through the nearly dark kitchen and into the hall, he could hear someone snoring. It must be Dixon. When he reached the front room, Bear and Garvin stood right away, smiles covering their faces at the sight of Little John asleep on his shoulder.

Sam placed a finger over his lips, indicating they should remain quiet. He handed his rifle to Bear and then proceeded down the hall toward his son’s room.

He entered the bedroom, and let his eyes adjust to the darkness for a moment. Little John’s room held that scent unique to little boys. With five brothers, he recognized the scent well. It smelled like the forest after a rain, and sunshine too, and grass mixed with dirt. All that mingled with the earthy aroma given off by his son’s assorted treasures— mostly rocks, bird nests, and feathers.

With one arm, he tugged the bed’s blanket down and then laid Little John on the sheet and pillow. He removed his son’s coat and boots and then tucked the blanket around his little body. At the foot of the bed, Catherine had lain an extra blanket and he covered him with that too. Morning wasn’t far off, but Little John would likely sleep for some time. He stepped to the room’s window and pulled the two deerskin drapes closed. The skins served as curtains and effectively kept some of winter’s chill from entering the room.

He knelt and kissed his son on the forehead. “Sweet dreams,” he whispered.

Sam stepped out into the hall, lit by a wall sconce burning a beeswax candle. He quietly tapped a knuckle to the door of his own room. “Catherine, I’m back.”

The door flew open nearly instantly. He could tell she hadn’t slept. Again, he placed a finger over his lips so she would whisper.

“Sam, thank God. Did you find him?”

“Yes, he’s fine.” He motioned for her to follow him to their son’s room. He pointed and let her go in first.

Bending over the bed, she placed one hand over her mouth. He suspected she was trying to keep from crying out with pure joy. She placed the other hand on Little John’s head and gently stroked his

hair. Then she glanced back at Sam, eyes glistening with unshed tears of happiness and relief.

She turned and hugged Sam as tightly as she could with the significant barrier protruding between them. When she released him, she gazed up into his face, her beautiful eyes still sparkling like afternoon sun dancing on blue water.

He softly brushed his fingers against her check and then lifted her chin and kissed her fully, letting the love that filled him flow through his lips. Her mouth felt luxuriously warm against his chilled lips and the skin on her face seemed almost hot to his icy fingers.

“Sam, you’re nearly frozen. Let’s get you warmed up.” Taking his hand, she led him out.

“Is Artis still asleep?” he asked as they made their way toward the front room.

“Yes, I believe so,” Catherine answered. “She was exhausted.”

When the two of them stood in front of a still snoring Dixon, Catherine did something completely out of character for her. She kicked Dixon in the shin.

“Ouch!” he said coming awake.

“Get out of my husband’s chair. Now!” Catherine ordered in a voice of authority Sam had never heard her use before.

Dixon didn’t hesitate. His hands still tied, he stood and took a step and then two away from Catherine and Sam. Bear and Garvin just stood by smiling, while the man tugged and patted his clothes back into place.

Sam removed his coat, handed it to Garvin, and then took his chair.

Catherine turned to Garvin. “Would you be so kind as to go to the kitchen and pour the Captain a hot cup of coffee? And Bear, I believe there’s some brandy in that china cabinet that might warm him as well.” Both men moved at once to do her biding while she bent to remove his wet boots.

“No, I can get those,” he said, stopping her. With a tug on the wet leather, he got them both off and Catherine sat the boots by the hearth to dry.

Dixon started shifting back and forth on his feet looking as if he was growing more uncomfortable by the minute.

"Did you sleep well, Mr. Dixon?" Sam asked.

"Yes, I was most comfortable." Dixon looked behind him. "It doesn't look like the sun is up yet, but if you'd like to get an early start I'm…*amenable*."

Sam was enjoying this. "I appreciate your willingness, but I don't think I'm ready to get cold again, Mr. Dixon."

"Uh," he stammered. "How did you get cold? I thought you were sleeping."

"I took a little ride through the woods."

Dixon's eyes widened and he stood there motionless. "Were you out hunting?" he asked, hopefully.

"I was."

Dixon slowly blew out the breath he was holding. "Did you find anything?"

"Indeed I did."

Dixon's uneasiness increased when Sam narrowed his eyes. The man was finally catching on.

"What was that?" Dixon asked.

"I found a large swine."

"Ah yes, roasted pig, there's nothing like it," Dixon said.

"And the bastard told me he was just following orders."

Dixon's lips pursed and his face and neck flushed. "Mr. Wyllie, surely we can come to some kind of arrangement."

"Indeed. Here's what I can arrange. I'm going to make sure you and your partner are punished to the maximum extent of the law. I'll leave what that penalty is to the sheriff and judge at Fort Harrod."

"The good-for-nothin' deserves to be shot," Bear growled, his voice booming.

“Or hung,” Sam suggested.

Dixon visibly shuddered and smothered a groan. He cleared his throat and turned to Catherine. “Mrs. Wyllie, perhaps I could accept your kind offer after all.” His pleading eyes looked pathetic.

Catherine put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. With stiff dignity, she said, “Mr. Dixon, our son is resting in his bed after the terrifying ordeal you put him through. What I *should* do is ask Sam’s brother Bear here to take you to our woodpile and shove a freshly-cut log up your ample ass. What I *will* do is ask him to remove you from our home.”

Bear chuckled and Garvin’s face registered his apparent shock. None of them, even Sam, had ever heard Catherine say anything as coarse as that.

Sam spoke up. “Bear and Garvin, escort Mr. Dixon to the barn. He needs to join his partner in one of the stalls before my wife thinks of another creative way to punish him. Although, if you want to stop at the wood pile, I’m *‘amenable’*,” he said.

Dixon’s expression turned fearful as Bear and Garvin each grabbed an arm and dragged the man out the front door.

As soon as the door shut, he said, “Come here my gorgeous wife. I need you to warm me up.”

With a springy step, she moved to him and stood in front of his chair, her eyes shining down at him.

He reached up and tugged her into his lap.

“Sam! I can’t sit on your lap. I’m big and fat now. And I’m certainly not beautiful.” She tried to stand up, but he held her fast.

“You are big, I’ll grant you that,” he said, placing a palm across her belly. “But you’re not fat. You’re going through this for both of us. You carry our child. If anything, being heavy with our babe has made you all the more beautiful. In fact, you’ve never looked lovelier.” He let one of his fingertips trace the swell of her now more ample bosom.

She flushed but remained silent.

He couldn’t wait to see their babe suckling at his mother’s breasts. What a glorious sight that would be. “Any more pain?” he asked.

She didn't answer for a moment and he could see her trying to formulate an answer he would accept. What he wanted was honesty.

"Catherine, just tell me."

She let out a deep sigh. "Yes. It's happening quite frequently. And it's more intense."

"What?" he nearly shouted. He knew it. Something was terribly wrong. He felt anger and panic contort his face. "Damn it!" The ferocity of his fear for her was frightening, even to him.

Catherine's eyes instantly watered and a tear dropped from each lash. "There's nothing you can do," she wailed. She pulled away from him and stood.

"Never underestimate what I can do," he swore. He stood as well and paced in front of the hearth, fighting for self-control.

After a few moments he let out his heated breath. "I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry. I should never have raised my voice. Please, forgive me. I don't know what's going on inside me. I can't seem to think straight."

"You're just worried. I'm worried too."

The admission touched his soul and left him reeling. He didn't know what to do or say. He should be able to fix this, but he couldn't. He could only love her.

He kissed the inside of her hand and placed the palm against her stomach. "A kiss for our babe."

Catherine looked up at him warmly. He could tell she was touched by his gesture.

"And a kiss for you," she whispered. "I love you so very much." She placed her lips on his and gave him a kiss rich with love.

With his hand resting on her belly, Sam could have sworn he felt the love of their child as well.

Chapter 15

Fort Logan, Tuesday, 20 January, 1799

Numerous homes and a few businesses sprouted out from the fort in all directions. William rode beside Rory who directed the horse team through the large open gates that towered above them.

"Here!" Nicole declared.

"No, dear, we have only arrived at Fort Logan," Kelly said. "We'll go to see your uncles and aunts tomorrow."

Standing in the back of the wagon with his tail wagging, Riley barked at a couple of dogs scampering around the fort. "Stay, Riley!" Kelly told him.

Bear had suggested that William seek out Colonel Logan as soon as they arrived at the fort. After getting directions to the Colonel's quarters from a man riding by, William asked his father-in-law to keep an eye on Kelly and Nicole. Kelly wanted to shop a little while they were here, so Rory drove the wagon toward the dozen or so shops, located in a number of buildings on the other side of the fort.

"Be sure you tie Riley to the back of the wagon while you're shopping," William said. He watched the wagon pull away, glad that Rory would keep his precious golden-haired girls and dog safe. If the fort were anything like Boonesborough, there would be a mixture here of both good folk and unsavory types looking to take advantage of someone. But Rory was not the type to let anyone take advantage of him or his family. Although middle-aged, he was still lean and robust. His many years spent outdoors as a trapper had made Rory a vigorous and strong man for his age. His ruggedly attractive face and big hands were sun-dried and leathery, but only sprinkle of gray sparkled in his dark hair. With the exception of her blonde hair and nearly violet eyes, it was clear that Kelly had inherited some of her good looks from her father. Most of all, William admired Rory's keen intelligence and calm nature.

He turned Smoke toward the Colonel's blockhouse. Logan's office

and quarters were situated to the right of the massive entrance. They had arrived much later than he had hoped. But considering last night's snowfall, he was pleased they'd managed to travel the distance to the fort before full darkness set in. Fortunately, the road to the fort was well-travelled and other wagons and horses had cut a path through the snow.

The sun's final rays of the day splayed across the sharpened logs of the high stockade on the fort's eastern side. Beams of soft light fell on the surprisingly crowded station, bathing everyone and everything in a warm golden light.

As William rode, he noticed the militia's barracks, stables, storehouses, and other buildings, grouped around the central enclosure. The fort was not quite as large as Fort Boonesborough but it was swarming with more people. As crowded as it appeared, he hoped the Colonel would be able to provide quarters for at least Kelly and Nicole. With the setting sun, he could feel the temperature dropping and he wanted them in a warm place for the night if possible.

William tied Smoke to a rail, stepped onto the porch outside the Colonel's office, and knocked. "Colonel, it's William Wyllie," he called, "Sam and Bear's brother." William had often heard numerous stories recounting Logan's bravery in action so he looked forward to meeting the man.

The door flew open and Logan extended two hands in greeting, gripping William's hand firmly. "William, welcome. So I finally get to meet the famous sheriff of Boonesborough. Come in, come in."

"Colonel," William said, chuckling and stepping inside. "I'm pleased to meet you, but if you're looking for somebody famous, you have the wrong man."

"Well, your reputation precedes you. You Wyllie brothers are all upstanding young men. And I see, like your brothers, you're tall and look like you could hold your own in a fight," the Colonel said, taking in William's six foot height.

Benjamin Logan was an imposing figure himself—just over six-feet tall.

"I just saw your younger brother Stephen and his family yesterday. They were here buying supplies. Please have a seat."

William entered Logan's dimly lit office and took a seat in front of his pine desk. The office held the faint scents of tobacco and an open ink bottle. "Have they left?" William asked.

"Yes," Logan answered, closing the ink up and setting the goose quill pen and some papers aside. "They left just as soon as I told Stephen about the three strangers that showed up here looking for Sam. He didn't like the sound of it and neither did I. He left for his home about mid-morning and then was going to leave for Sam's place early today."

"Those men came through Boonesborough too. The shopkeep told Bear that they claimed to be friends of Sam. Yet neither Bear nor I recognized the men's names. So we decided it might be wise to come a little early for our Christmas visit. Bear left for Sam's on Sunday morning and my family and I left early this morning."

"I'll look forward to meeting your family. Where are you spending the night?"

"I was hoping you might be able to find quarters for at least my wife, Kelly and our young daughter, Nicole. She's not quite two and I don't want her to catch a fever or something in this weather."

"It's going to be colder tonight than my mother-in-law's love. But alas, there are no quarters available. Quite a few large families traveling together arrived today."

William exhaled a heavy sigh. "I was afraid of that when I saw how crowded the fort is. There must be a lot of people here gathering supplies or headed to visit relatives for the holidays."

"Indeed. And many new settlers as well. If you're willing to, you are welcome to use this office for the night. You can lay out some blankets in front of my hearth here. At least you will all have a roof over your heads and a floor under you." Logan pointed to the stone hearth blazing with a small but warm fire.

"Colonel, I would be most grateful."

"And Mrs. Logan has a nice roast cooking in the next room. We are happy to share—in fact, it's some of Stephen's beef. I just recently bought some cattle from him."

"It does smell wonderful, but there are four of us. My wife Kelly and our daughter Nicole. And Kelly's father Rory McGuffin, who is a

doctor. Five if you count our big dog Riley."

"The more the merrier, as they say. I'm sure my wife can conjure up enough food and blankets. She usually cooks enough food to feed Washington's army. And I love dogs. He can have all the scraps. We can begin celebrating the Christmas season tonight."

Bear had mentioned to William how hospitable the Colonel was and it certainly proved true. "I thank you, Sir, for your hospitality. It is unexpected, but is much appreciated."

"Next time I visit Boonesborough, you can reciprocate."

"That would be our pleasure. You would honor us by visiting our home. You are welcome at Whispering Hills anytime. Well, I guess I should go find my family. My wife went shopping. Why is it women want to shop every time they're anywhere near a store?"

"Men buy and women shop," Logan answered as though that settled the question. "When you get back, you and I and Kelly's father can share a warm brandy while Kelly gets to know my wife Ann."



As his family traveled toward Sam and Catherine's home, Stephen rode George next to Jane, who held the reins to their wagon team in her gloved hands. He was glad now that he insisted she buy a new pair of warm gloves lined with fur. "It's getting dark. Do you think you can keep going?" he asked her.

"What choice do we have? It's so cold and I don't want the children to spend the entire night out in the open."

Stephen glanced behind him. Martha, Polly, and Samuel were bundled up in warm clothes and asleep under several layers of blankets and furs. He hoped it was enough to keep them from getting a chill. If anything happened to…he stopped the thought, refusing to let his mind go there. He never wanted to experience that again.

"They're fine. They're sound asleep. But you look done in," he said. When he saw her frown, he quickly amended, "You look beautiful, as always, but I can tell you're weary."

He wasn't lying to her. She was lovely. Gorgeous, in fact. Especially her fiery red hair and emerald eyes. And the moon's rays made the fair skin on her face glow like the finest porcelain. He could hardly look at Jane without desiring her. For now though, he needed

to be sure he took care of her. They'd been on the road since early that morning and Jane needed a rest.

"Stop for a minute. I'll tie George to the rear. Why don't you crawl in the back and get warm. Maybe you'll be able to sleep for a while," he told her.

Jane nodded and pulled the wagon to a stop. He dismounted, flexed his stiff legs until he could walk comfortably, and then quickly tied George. "Take a rest big boy," he said patting the horse on the neck.

He scrambled up onto the wagon bench, gave Jane a quick kiss, and took the reins.

She climbed into the back and disappeared beneath a heavy blanket and fur. "I love you," her muffled voice called up to him.

"And I love you, my darling," he said leaning back toward her. The sound of her voice and her words made him wish they could find some privacy in the next few days. But with William and his family, Bear and his new wife, and Sam's family and household help, he was certain privacy would be hard to come by.

He laid his Kentucky long rifle at his feet and started the horse team moving again. The night's nearly full moon shone bright enough that he could easily see the trail leading through the woods. The trees around them, their boughs hanging heavy with snow, shimmered in the moonlight. And deeper into the woods, where the light grew dimmer, the snow on the ground appeared almost purple. In the distance, he heard the sounds of owls, coyotes, fox, and other animals hunting in the fresh snow.

They weren't far now. Maybe another hour or two. They'd already been on Catherine and Sam's land for some time. But the last leg of any trip always seemed the longest. That was especially true of the last stretch of the thousand-mile journey they'd all endured to get to Kentucky.

A lonely wolf howled off in the distance. The mournful bellow from deep within the forest made his stomach clench. Frightening recollections flashed through his mind. Memories of one of the worst days of his life.

But it wasn't *the* worst day. After that day, he nearly gave up.

But he didn't. He'd stubbornly refused to abandon his quest to reach Kentucky. His daughters gave him good reason to go on. He had to find land where he could make a better living for his family. And thanks to Catherine's generosity, he didn't have to spend months or even years trying to acquire a land grant. Her gift of land allowed them to build their home before full winter set in. And, he was able to get an early start on his cattle operation. He would never be able to repay her what that was worth. Never. But he was going to try. He would do anything for Catherine. Or Sam. Somehow, he would find a way to thank them.

All his hard work was definitely paying off and things were looking up. Even after their purchases at Fort Logan, his money pouch still contained enough coin to buy quite a few more head of cattle. In no time, he would be supplying beef for all the surrounding forts—Fort Logan, Fort Harrod, and maybe even Fort Boonesborough. He could get some cowpunchers to help him or even hire some hands, just as Sam did, to help him drive the cattle.

He needed a name for his cattle operation and a brand. He'd read that even the ancient Egyptians and Romans used a hot iron to burn an ownership mark into cowhide. Back home, a few men adopted the practice brought over from England to identify and track down their stray cows, but he had yet to see a branded cow in Kentucky. Fencing in cattle on his acreage was near impossible—it was just too big a place. So branding made sense. Perhaps he would be the first to start the practice in Kentucky. The more he thought about the idea, the more he liked it.

He would design a brand in honor of his oldest brother. Sam deserved the honor. If it weren't for Sam, he doubted they would have made it to Kentucky. As he rolled possible designs for the brand through his head, he heard a terrible crack and then the wagon lurched violently to one side.

Jane and the girls screamed.

Chapter 16

Despite his fatigue from recovering Little John, that night Sam couldn't sleep. Although Catherine slept peacefully beside him, sleep eluded him.

In the wee hours before dawn, disturbing thoughts rolled through his head, one after the other as he stared into the semi-darkness. The remaining wedges of logs and embers burning in their bedroom hearth made dark shapes flit across the ceiling, matching the shadows darting through his mind. They were the shadows of the past brought to life by the murkiness of their uncertain future.

The *only* hesitation he had about marrying Catherine was the possibility of losing her. He never wanted to experience that kind of terrible heartache again; the grief that comes from losing a woman you loved with all your heart. He had been a young man when it happened. But the fear that sprung from that nightmarish event latched onto his heart and kept him from loving any woman again for far too many years.

And it kept him from loving Catherine much too long. He had stubbornly refused to let down his defenses. Even though he was a veteran of more battles than he could count, allowing himself to fall in love with Catherine was the hardest battle he ever waged. Largely because he was fighting his own heart.

When he finally let love grow stronger than fear—when he laid down his heart's armor—he cherished the feeling of being able to love again. There were no more shadows across his heart. No more terror-filled dreams to seize him during the night. Just a sense of peace and boundless joy. And he asked Catherine to marry him. And all the saints in heaven be praised, she agreed. He'd had nothing to give her save his heart and what he carried on his horse.

It was all she asked for.

But they both possessed one thing more valuable than a king's treasure—a future together.

It was all he asked for.

Since they'd been married, only love filled his heart. But now, with Catherine facing a potentially difficult delivery, he could feel fear struggling to reclaim his heart all over again. He absolutely did not want to let fear take hold of him. Once fear takes root, it burrows inside of you, and it becomes hard to grub out. And then, it can change who you are—you can become afraid to live life. Afraid to love.

To hell with that.

He would battle it, he decided. Like the warrior he was. He would put up his strongest guard. He could defeat it.

He needed to be strong for Catherine. He needed her. But now, she needed him even more.

He hadn't given in to his terror when Little John was threatened and kidnapped. He'd managed to keep his fear at bay. He was certainly distressed and full or worry. But, as he always had in the heat of battle, he'd remained clear-headed and decisive, allowing him to lead the successful rescue of his son.

But with Catherine, it was different. He couldn't do anything to help her. This was one battle that could not be fought. But if he kept this up, when the time came for her to deliver, he would be nothing more than a blithering idiot. He came far too close to succumbing to terror when she admitted that the ache in her side was now worse and nearly constant. He feared for her and their babe. A pain meant something was wrong.

And that scared the hell out of him.

Perhaps being afraid was understandable. But letting it control him was not. He wouldn't allow it.

He chastised himself for how his worry had made him treat Catherine. For heaven's sake, he'd even made her cry. He'd probably even made her feel as if this was her fault. How could he be so thoughtless when she needed him the most?

He resolved to be a tower of strength for her—not the worrywart he'd shown her recently. That wasn't him and never had been. He was not a man to worry overmuch. He was the kind of man that faced life head on—that welcomed life's challenges with self-assurance and

courage. And took action when needed.

Whatever happened, with God's help, they would get through this. Together.

He reached over and laid his hand on her arm. "Catherine."

She moaned and rolled on her side toward him.

"Catherine, wake up. I have to tell you something." He hated waking her, but this couldn't wait.

"Sam, what is it?"

"I've been lying here awake because I need to apologize. Come here. Let me hold you, while I tell you what my heart wants me to say to you."

She scooted into his arms and placed her head on his shoulder. He leaned his cheek against the silky hair on her head. The feel of their child lying against him made his heart swell with emotion. Oh Lord, how he wanted the babe to come into this world safely and be healthy and strong.

"What do you want to say, Sam?"

Her long dark tresses gleamed like polished ebony in the dim light cast by the hearth fire. A swath of wavy hair fell across her breasts and lay between them. Her gentle overwhelming beauty made him pause for a moment before he spoke. Taking a deep breath, he said, "I'm sorry to wake you, but this can't wait."

"Is something wrong?"

"It's me Catherine. I can't help it. I've never been more worried in my life. I love you beyond reason and I want nothing in this world more than for you to be all right."

"I know that, Sam."

"Nonetheless, I should not let fear of something bad happening take hold of me. I've been letting that happen too often lately. I let it happen again earlier this evening. When you said that the pain was happening frequently, I gave in to my panic for a moment. I'm sorry I've been so short-tempered."

"It's all right, Sam. I understand your fear of losing someone you

love."

"No. It's *not* all right. That's not me and that's not the husband I want to be for you. I won't tolerate cowardness, even in me."

"You have always been a courageous man. Everyone admires your brave spirit, especially me. But this isn't about courage. It's about believing."

"Believing what?" he asked.

"Believing in hope. Believing in a miracle. It's not believing that God can perform a miracle for us—it's believing that He *will*."

"I do believe that Catherine. But at times, I'm ashamed to admit, I forget."

"I'll try to help you remember. But sometimes I forget too. I admit to feeling scared."

She's been afraid she was going to die. She just hadn't said anything to protect him. The realization tugged on his heart.

"From now on, I promise I will be the husband you can lean on whenever you're frightened. I don't want you to hide anything from me. Please let me share my strength with you. When you're scared, I'll wrap you in my arms and protect you from fear. My arms are strong enough. I promise."

Sam felt a tear fall on his bare shoulder. Damn, he'd made her cry again.

"Sam, that is the most beautiful thing you've ever said to me," she whispered, her voice choking. "I will let you." She squeezed the muscle of his arm. "You're arms are more than strong enough to protect me. And so is your heart." She moved her hand and placed it against his heart.

He reached behind her neck and pulled her full parted lips to his. With all the warmth pouring from his heart, he kissed her thoroughly and tenderly, desperate to lay claim to as much of her as he could without risking hurting her.

He ran his fingers into her hair and then deepened the kiss. It was a kiss to feed her soul, not his desire. For the last month, he'd refrained from making love to her. He wouldn't risk harming her or the babe, or causing the ache in her side to grow worse.

But he would make sure his tender affections reached all the way to her very soul.

In doing so, he felt more gratification than the most passionate night of their marriage.

He loved her beyond physical passion.

He loved her beyond fear.

Chapter 17

Early Wednesday, 21 December, 1799

Catherine stood with Sam, Bear, and Artis, on the porch and watched as the farm hands left with the two bound prisoners.

Crowell looked miserable as he went by, but Dixon gave them all a sneering look.

Catherine exhaled as they passed and leaned against Sam, glad to see the despicable men headed for the punishment they deserved.

Their four men would take the two scoundrels to the sheriff at Fort Harrod, about sixty miles to the northwest, to await trial in the Kentucky Federal District Court, recently established in Harrodsburg. Sam assigned two men to guard each one until they were in the custody of the sheriff.

After they delivered the prisoner, the four were to take some time off for the holidays and stay in Harrodsburg or visit relatives until the Twelfth Day race. After the race, they would all come back together. Sam gave each of them sufficient funds to ensure they thoroughly enjoyed their holiday, telling them it was a Christmas bonus for all their hard work over the last year.

With the four men gone, there will be more food for all the relatives coming soon, Catherine thought. She couldn't wait for them to all be together again. But this time, Bear had his stunning new wife, and William and Kelly now had a beautiful daughter. And Stephen and Jane would bring their young son. The son that Stephen had wanted so desperately. Their family was growing fast.

"Why don't we all go in and have another cup of coffee?" she suggested. As they gathered in the front room, Mrs. Wrigley brought a fresh pot and some of Bear's favorite sweets. With Bear here, the cook would have to double all her recipes just to keep the enormous man full.

Bear took a cookie and put the entire thing in his mouth. After a

few chews he said, “That’s paw-lickin’ good!”

The cookies made Catherine miss Little John’s presence. “Excuse me,” she said, “I want to peek my head in to see if Little John’s awake yet.”

She opened the door to his room as quietly as she could. Her son lay crying in the semi-darkness. “Little John,” she said, “what’s the matter dear? Are you still frightened? Those men are gone now. Our hands are taking them to Fort Harrod’s jail. You’re safe now.”

She sat on the edge of his bed and took the boy’s hand, moist with just wiped tears.

He sniffled and rubbed his nose on the sheet. “I’m not afraid of them. Pa took care of them.”

“Then what is it?”

“I can’t tell you,” he sobbed.

“You can’t?”

“No!” Despite his defiant answer, he sat up and hugged her tightly, his little arms wrapped completely around her neck. He clung to her for several moments crying on her shoulder before he finally released her.

She kissed his head and then both his wet cheeks. “I love you Little John. You can tell me what’s bothering you.”

That only seemed to make him cry harder. “I love you too,” he managed to choke out.

“You can’t talk about it?” she asked, and swabbed his tears with her fingers.

“No, I cannot.”

“Could you talk to your Father about it? I’ll go get him if you want me to.”

“No, he’s already worried too. I can tell.”

“Worried about what?” she asked.

“I said I can’t talk about it.” He laid back down and yanked the sheet over his head.

The sight tugged at her heart. Perhaps he just needed time alone. “Rest for few minutes. Then I’ll bring you some warm cookies and milk for breakfast.”

He didn’t respond to her, even though it was his favorite breakfast. Catherine shut the door behind her and went out to the front room. “Sam, Little John is upset. He’s crying and says he can’t tell me why. Or you.”

“Maybe the lad is still scared from his ordeal,” Artis suggested.

“He said he wasn’t. He said he wasn’t scared of the men anymore because his father took care of them.”

Sam stood. “I’ll go talk to him.”

“No, wait,” Catherine told him. “I think it might be better if Bear went to him. Perhaps he can tell his uncle whatever it is he can’t tell us.”

“I’ll see what I can do to help the lad.” Bear sprang up from his chair, and headed toward Little John’s room.

Catherine awkwardly plopped into her chair, still tired from their long night.

Artis rose and poured her a cup of coffee. “Here. Ye look awfully peely-wally.”

Catherine recognized the Scottish expression and smiled at Artis as she accepted the steaming cup. “No, I’m not feeling poorly. I’m just a bit tired.”

“Is that ache still there?” Sam asked.

Catherine could still hear apprehension in her husband’s voice, despite his good intentions to not be fearful. Little John was right. Sam was worried. It amazed her how perceptive a young child could be. Was Little John worried about her too? She looked up at Sam. “No, surprisingly, it’s disappeared for now,” she answered. It was the truth. Perhaps the midwife’s suggestion to drink coffee had worked and the baby turned after all.

It would be an answer to her prayers if he had.



Bear ducked his head and entered Little John's room. "Little John, I would have a word with ye."

"Bear!" the boy cried out, then flung the sheet down and sat up. "I didn't know you were here!"

"Aye. I came last night and helped searched for ye. What's this I hear about ye feeling a wee bit down?"

Little John stood up on his knees in the bed and grabbed Bear as soon as he sat on the bed. Before he knew it, the boy sat in his lap and he enclosed his nephew within his big arms.

"Bear, I missed you." Tears trickled down the boy's cheeks.

"I missed ye too, Little John. But I'm enormously glad we are together now. And we will be together for quite a while too—until a few days after Christmas. And I brought ye those presents I promised."

"You did?"

"Aye, but ye will have to wait until Christmas morn to get them."

"I can wait. If I have too," he mumbled with a pout. The lad sniffled, but the tears had stopped.

"And I brought my new wife too."

"You did! Is she beautiful like my mother?"

"She is indeed. Her hair is a lovely golden-red color and her eyes are a brilliant green. And she's tall for a woman. Now tell me what's got yer insides all stirred up," Bear told him.

"It's my mother. Something is terribly wrong."

"And how, pray tell, do ye know this?"

"Because the mid-wife came yesterday and when she left, I saw her leaving in her wagon. I was hidden behind a tree. She did not look happy at all. Her face was frowning. And then," another sniffle, "and then I saw my mother on the front porch crying. Her face looked so worried and she seemed upset."

"So that made ye worried?"

"Yes. I was afraid the mid-wife told her she was gonna die, just like my first mother. You know my first mother died having a baby,

don't you? The baby was me!"

"Aye, I knew yer lovely mother, Little John." Someday he would tell the boy that he and Sam were both there when he was born. And that his mother died bravely.

"She died! And I never got to see her again. And it's going to happen a second time." Little John started crying all over again.

"What did ye do when ye saw yer mother cryin'?"

"I started running into the woods and I just kept running and running and running. But then those men found me."

"It sounds as if ye had a dreadfully bad day indeed my lad."

"I did," Little John agreed.

"Well now. Let's see if we can make this day a better one. Shall we?"

Little John nodded.

"First, women who are about to give birth, often worry that all will be well. 'Tis common because they already love their babes so. Seein' yer Mum looking worried is not somethin' that should frighten ye. Ye must help her na to worry."

"What about the mid-wife? She looked and sounded worried too."

"From what Sam tells me, there's no pleasin' the woman. Sam said that when she gets to heaven, she'll ask to see another room."

Little John chuckled a bit.

"So ye see, there's nothin' to worry yer head about. We need to be brave for Catherine, so she will na worry so much herself. Can ye help me do that lad? Aye?"

"Aye."

"Excellent! The cook has made some wee cookies that will make ye smile from ear to ear. Want to go try some and meet my lovely wife?"

"I'll get dressed now and come out in a few minutes."

“Aye, but promise me ye’ll talk to me or yer father if ye start to get worried once again.”

Little John nodded and Bear poured some water into a basin set on a low table for him. “Wash yer face well and comb that pile of straw on yer head ‘fore ye come out. I want ye to make a good impression on Artis. I’ve been braggin’ about ye to her ever since we met.”

“You have?”

“Aye. I’m awfully proud of ye lad.”

Little John smiled, got out of bed, and hugged him again. “I feel better now, Uncle Bear.”

Bear quickly patted Little John on the head, swung around, and left before he got weepy himself. He loved that boy with all his heart.

Bear entered the front room and everyone looked his way expectantly.

“Well?” Sam asked, standing. “Should I go see him?”

“He’ll be out as soon as he gets dressed,” Bear answered. “He’s worried about Catherine. He’s terrified that she’ll die too, like his first mum.”

“What would make him think that?” Sam asked.

“Because he saw the midwife leave yesterday and she appeared worried. Then he saw Catherine cryin’ on the front porch as she watched the midwife leave. He’s a smart lad. He put two and two together and decided somethin’ must be wrong.”

Sam instantly turned to Catherine. “Why were you crying? *Is* something wrong?”

Catherine’s face looked stricken. She leaned back in her chair.

“Catherine, please answer me,” Sam insisted, moving closer to her.

Catherine closed her eyes and sighed heavily. “I was waiting until the midwife’s next visit to tell you when we would know for sure. She thinks our baby is breech—feet first.”

“I know what breech means,” Sam bellowed. “Tell me what it means for *you*, and our baby.”

Bear gave his brother a reproachful look. Sam must be truly worried or he wouldn’t be so testy. Particularly with Catherine. Sam never raised his voice with her.

Sam knelt in front of Catherine, whose eyes were watering, and took her hands in his. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be so cross, but you should have told me. What else did she say?” he asked gently.

“She wanted me to drink a lot of coffee to see if the baby would turn.”

“And has it?” Sam asked, his eyes scrutinizing Catherine’s face.

“I haven’t felt it turn or move significantly. I just don’t know.”

“Catherine, please don’t keep anything from me,” Sam said, keeping his voice gentle. “I asked you to share your worries with me.”

Catherine’s lower lip quivered. “Sam, I truly don’t know. I wish I did.”

Artis stood and went to Catherine. “Come dear, ye need to rest.”

Catherine glanced up at Artis. “No, I’m not going anywhere. I am perfectly fine. I just want to rest here a while and wait for Little John. If I leave, he’ll be worried again.”

Sam stood and let out a long breath. “I’m going to go get that damn midwife.”

“Sam, it’s not my time yet. I’ll tell you when you need to go fetch her,” Catherine said. “Please, try to calm down.”

“Aye, Catherine will be fine, Sam,” Bear said, trying to calm his brother, and hoping his words would prove true. A breech babe often meant the worst possible outcome. “Did I mention that William and Kelly should be arriving tomorrow? And Kelly is bringing her father. McGuffin never told us when he was here helping to build this house, but he’s a doctor.”

“A doctor?” Sam asked. “Why would he keep something like that a secret?”

“He had his reasons,” Bear said, “and they were good ones. But if

Rory wants to tell you, it should come from him. We only found out when Artis was shot."

Sam peered at Artis. "Shot?"

"It's a long story and I will tell it to ye later. Because of a terrible storm and flooding, we couldn't get Artis back to town. So Rory operated on her," Bear explained.

"Operated?" Catherine asked, looking astounded.

"Aye, he's a surgeon. And a damn good one," Bear said.

"He saved my life," Artis said. "He saved the life Bear and I will share together," she added looking up at Bear.

"Aye, he saved her from certain death," Bear said, trying to sound optimistic despite his worried thoughts. Would McGuffin be able to save Catherine? And the life she was meant to share with Sam?

Chapter 18

Sam was just finishing bathing and shaving when he heard pounding against the sturdy wooden planks of their front door. He tugged on his leather breeches, strapped on the belt that held his long knife, and snatched up the pistol he kept on the table beside the bed.

Waking, Catherine sat up in bed. “What was that?”

“Stay here,” he told her, grabbing his buckskin shirt on the way out.

He threw open his bedroom door and in the hall nearly ran into Bear, his hatchet clutched in his hand.

The frantic knocking did not abate at all as they made their way into the front room. Bear stood just to the left of the door, hatchet poised to defend Sam if needed.

Sam tossed his shirt into a nearby chair. “Who goes there?” he demanded.

“Sam!” It was Stephen’s voice. “Open up!”

Sam sat the pistol down by the entrance table, unbarred the door, and flung it open. “Stephen!” He peered out as his youngest brother rushed in. He saw Stephen’s stallion panting hard, hot puffs of mist floating from the horse’s nostrils into the frigid air. Not seeing anyone else, or signs of trouble, he closed the door.

Bear gave Stephen a hasty hug. “What’s amiss brother?”

Stephen’s cold-reddened face appeared worried. “My family is out there in the cold. I broke a wagon wheel and we spent a long miserable night shivering. I didn’t want to leave them alone at night in the woods, so I waited until this morning to come for help.”

“Jane and your lasses and wee lad must be near freezin’,” Bear said.

“They were, so before I left, I gathered a supply of wood and built them a warm fire. I wasn’t on the road very long before your men came along with their prisoners. They agreed to wait with Jane and the children until we got back there with another wagon.”

“How far away are they?” Sam asked, slipping his buckskin shirt over his head. He hoped his four men would guard the prisoners well and not let the two pose a threat to Jane and the kids. He didn’t mention his concern to Stephen. His brother had enough to worry about.

“About an hour’s wagon ride,” Stephen answered. “I’ve made the trip between our homes dozens of times. And the old wagon chooses to strand us in the middle of the forest on one of the coldest nights of the year. What rotten luck.” He sounded tired and disgusted.

Bear turned to leave. “I’ll get the wagon team hitched up and meet ye in front.”

Catherine rushed in, followed by Artis. Both women must have dressed hastily and their long hair was still braided.

“Stephen!” Catherine squealed as soon as she caught sight of him.

His wife had always been fond of Sam’s brothers. They went through a lot together—good times and bad—and it made them all close.

“Hello Catherine. You’re looking as elegant as ever,” Stephen said, clasping her outstretched hands and giving her an affectionate hug.

Catherine smiled at the compliment. “I look like one of your heifers about to drop a calf. Nevertheless, thank you. Is everything all right? Where are Jane and the children?”

“Yes, we’re all fine, but it was cold enough last night that your milk cow will probably only give you icicles this morning.”

Leave it to Stephen to relate everything, even the weather, to cows.

“He broke a wagon wheel,” Sam explained, as he put several logs on the smoldering coals in the hearth. “His family is stranded, but our men are guarding them. Bear is going back with him in our wagon to retrieve them all.”

Stephen removed the scarf and tricorne from his head and took a few steps toward Artis. “You must be Artis. I’m Stephen. You’re just as lovely as Bear described in his letter. I thought he was exaggerating, as he is inclined to do sometimes, but he wasn’t.”

Artis glanced at Bear with a smile and he winked back at her. “I’m pleased to finally make yer acquaintance,” she replied, extending her hand to Stephen.

Stephen ignored her hand and embraced her warmly. “Welcome to our family.”

When he released her, Artis gazed up at Stephen’s face, flushed by the cold. “Oh my, yer cheeks are like blocks of ice. Ye need some hot coffee.”

Catherine immediately turned toward the kitchen. “I’ll go pour him a cup and ask Mrs. Wrigley to pack some food for his family too. Sam, pour him a brandy. Are you going with them?” she asked.

“Nay, Sam needs to stay with ye,” Bear answered. “Stephen and I can take care of everythin’.”

“I’ll go!” Artis said. “Perhaps I can help with yer wee bairns.”

“Nay Artis, there will na be enough room in the wagon with Stephen’s large family, their travelin’ bags, and the wagon wheel. Please stay with Catherine. She may need ye more,” Bear said.

“Aye, ye’re right. Of course, I’ll stay,” Artis kindly agreed, looking over at Catherine. “Let’s go get Stephen’s coffee.”

Sam noticed Stephen shivering and rubbing his arms trying to warm up. He poured a generous amount of brandy knowing it would warm Stephen’s insides faster than anything else would, and handed the mug to his brother.

Stephen removed his gloves and took the cup, his hands trembling, and downed it in one gulp. “Thanks, I truly needed that. Once you start quivering with cold, it’s hard to stop.”

Bear finished buttoning his coat and started for the barn to hitch up the wagon and retrieve a new wheel. Since he’d lived here until a few months ago, Bear knew his way around the place. He glanced back at Stephen when he reached the door. “It will take me a few moments to gather up the wagon team and get them ready. Ye stay by the fire and drink a cup of coffee for a few minutes. Will ye need a

fresh mount too?"

"No, I'll tie George onto the back of the wagon so we can both have a rest from riding. I rode him hard getting here, but he'll only have to keep up with the wagon on the way there, and I'd rather have my horse in case I need him. I'd be grateful though if you could be sure he gets some water and a few bites of hay."

"Aye, I'll take the big fellow to the barn with me." The door slammed loudly behind him, as it always did. Bear often forgot his own strength.

"Are Jane and the children doing well?" Sam asked, concerned, as he stoked the fire. It had been an extremely cold night.

"Lord, I hope so. At least they seemed so when I left. I hated that they had to spend so many hours in the cold. It can't be good for them. Especially Samuel," Stephen said. "He's still a little fellow."

Sam could hear the heart-wrenching worry in his brother's voice.

"How is Catherine doing?" Stephen asked. "She seems very far along."

"She is nearing her time. The midwife is worried that the babe may be breech," Sam said.

Sam saw alarm register in Stephen's eyes. His brother cleared his throat and then said, "I'm sure all will be fine."

"We are praying that it will be," Sam said.

"As will I," Stephen said. "Where is my nephew?"

"He was outside playing with his pet rabbit earlier, but I think I just heard the back door slam. He's probably in the kitchen. The boy is *always* hungry. Little John, come here," Sam called to the boy. "Your Uncle Stephen has arrived."

Little John came scurrying into the front room from the kitchen carrying a hunk of buttered bread. "Where is he?" he nearly shouted. When he caught sight of Stephen, he ran toward him. "Uncle Stephen!" Little John leapt into Stephen's outstretched arms. "Guess what?"

"What?"

“My new pet rabbit Peter had babies!”

Stephen chuckled. “Well then, that’s good news, but I suggest that you may want to change his or rather her name.”

“I will. Where are Martha and Polly? They can help me pick out a girl name.”

“Our wagon broke and Bear is going to help me bring a new one to them. We should all be back by mid-day,” Stephen told his nephew.

“Will you hurry please?” Little John asked, finishing his bread.

“Better yet, why don’t you come along with Bear and I? You can ride on the wagon seat between us on the way there and on the way back, I’ll put you in front of me on George.”

Little John turned to him. “Father may I? Pleeeeze.”

Sam knew Martha and Polly were more like sisters to him than cousins. The three spent months together on their journey to Kentucky. “Yes, son. It will be fun for you to go greet your cousins,” Sam told him. “Go get dressed in your warmest clothing. Put your wool socks on and you’ll need a hat and scarf.”

Little John jumped down from Stephen’s arms and dashed to his room.

Sam turned back to face Stephen. “You’ve come early for your Christmas visit.”

“We did. I decided to leave as soon as I heard from Colonel Logan about the suspicious men from New Hampshire. We went to the fort for supplies and to buy the girls Christmas presents. I ran into him there. He told me he didn’t have a good feeling about the three men’s intentions. If you needed me, I wanted to be here sooner rather than later.”

Sam chuckled. “I suppose William will be arriving any minute too. My brothers must be thinking I’m getting too old to handle a few pesky land speculators.”

A corner of Stephen’s mouth turned up in a half smile. “No, far from it. You’ll never be too old to handle anything, I think. You’ll be ninety and I’ll be eighty and you’ll still be looking out for me.”

Sam grinned. He couldn’t deny the truth in Stephen’s words. As

the oldest of his siblings, he always felt a certain responsibility for them. It was something he would never outgrow. “I hope we both live to see such a ripe old age and we can sit on the porch bragging about our grandkids,” Sam said, taking his chair.

“So, what about those strangers?” Stephen asked. He remained standing by the fire, his hands clasped behind him. “Were they the prisoners I saw?”

“The bastards kidnapped Little John, but my men and I got him back.”

“Kidnapped? Good Lord, why?”

“They were trying to force me to sell our family’s mountain back in New Hampshire. I suspect they discovered gold on the mountain and some company promised those two a fortune if they could bring back the signed deed. It’s a rather long story, but it ended well. We got Little John back unharmed. Bear can tell you all about those three swine on your way,” Sam said.

“Three? I only saw two.”

“One of them wanted to talk with his pistol instead of his mouth. Now he can do neither,” Sam said matter of factly.

“Here’s yer coffee,” Artis said, joining them with a steaming cup. “I made a fresh batch, but I let it cool a wee bit.”

“I’m grateful,” Stephen told her. “I believe I’ll enjoy this more than any cup I’ve ever had.” He blew on the hot brew and then risked a small sip.

Catherine came in carrying a basket of food. “Mrs. Wrigley helped us pack this up for you,” Catherine said. Between the three of us, I think we packed a hearty meal for your family.”

“Catherine, you should have let me or Artis carry that basket,” Sam admonished.

“Oh, it’s not that heavy,” she answered, dismissively.

“Jane and the children will be grateful,” Stephen said. “We only packed enough food for our trip, thinking we would arrive much sooner.”

“Do you need anything else?” Sam asked.

“I just need to get going,” Stephen answered, the urgency returning to his voice. He swallowed several large gulps of the coffee. “Bear should be nearly through hitching up the team by now. I’ll go check on George.” Taking the last of the coffee in one big swallow, he sat the cup down and tugged his gloves on his now steady hands.

Sam turned to Catherine. “Little John will be tagging along with his uncles. He’s dressing now.”

“I’ll go be sure he wears his warm clothes,” Catherine said, heading toward their son’s room.

“I figure with the repair work on the wheel, we should expect you back around noon,” Sam said. “I know I don’t have to say it, but take good care of Little John for me. I know they’re tied up, but don’t let him get anywhere near Dixon or Crowell.”

“I’ll guard him well,” Stephen promised, and then he bid goodbye to Artis and Catherine as soon as she rejoined them with Little John readied.

Little John carried his rifle. His shot pouch and powder horn hung from his shoulder. Sam was glad his son thought about preparing for danger. Living in the wild necessitated that way of thinking.

“I see I’ll have an extra man to protect my daughters,” Stephen said.

“It was my birthday present,” Little John said holding the rifle up. He straightened his back and stood a bit taller.

It won’t be long, Sam thought, before he’s as tall as I am.

He peered down at his son, and made his voice firm. “Remember the number one rule. Don’t put your finger on the trigger until you are certain you’re aiming at something you want to kill. Rifles don’t kill. You do.”

“I’ll remember. Until I know what I’m aiming at, I’ll keep my trigger finger pointed straight out, like this,” Little John said, showing him exactly the way Sam had taught him. “And I’ll never touch the trigger until I see inside of my head what’s in my rifle’s sights.”

“And?” Stephen asked. “The number two rule.” Stephen knew what it was because Sam was the one who taught him.

“I will never be afraid or reluctant to defend myself or my family,” Little John said.

“You make me proud son,” Sam said. He grabbed the basket of food and walked them out to the porch.

Bear pulled the wagon up with a new wheel loaded in the back and George tied behind.

Stephen helped Little John jump up onto the wagon seat. Bear and Stephen moved him in between them and covered him with a blanket before taking off.

“Tell Garvin I said to keep a hawk’s eye on those two snakes,” Sam called after them.

Chapter 19

The forest seemed eerily pure to Bear, covered in its mantle of white, as he and Stephen hurried toward the broken down wagon. The crisp air smelled clean and the sun's rays beamed through the trees like shafts of long delicate crystals.

It wasn't long before Little John fell asleep on Stephen's lap.

"The lad must still be tired from his ordeal," he told Stephen.

"What happened exactly?" Stephen asked.

Bear recounted the terrible events from start to finish.

"I can't believe those men abducted a child," Stephen said. "We'd best pick up the pace. I don't want my children around men like that any longer than necessary."

"Aye," Bear agreed, giving the reins a quick snap. "I'm sure Dixon could tell from the look on Sam's face, when they talked to him, that they would have to do somethin' drastic to get Sam to sign. Sam is na a man to waver or sit on the fence. Once he's made up his mind, it's decided."

"Agreed. And, I think Sam is right. Gold must have been their motivation. Gold has made men do stupid things for thousands of years."

"In tryin' to gain the world, some men lose their souls," Bear said.

"When Garvin and his men came by, I assumed the two men were the strangers trying to buy Wyllie Mountain. I was in such a rush to get help for my family, I didn't even ask Garvin why they were prisoners. The fact that Sam wanted them sent to jail was all I needed to know."

"Aye, they're the same snakes," Bear said.

“If I’d known what they did to Little John, I would have given them a taste of a Wyllie fist in their viperous mouths,” Stephen said. “They may still get a taste of my fist. How dare they frighten our nephew like that?”

“Aye, they place no value on common decency. I found it hard to restrain myself around the two. Judgin’ from the looks of Crowell, he got more than one taste of Sam’s fists. But Sam held me back when I wanted to break Dixon’s fingers to get the wretched arse to tell us where Little John was. As usual, Sam kept his head and it paid off.”

“Frankly, I’m a little surprised he didn’t dispatch the two to hell once he recovered Little John. Sam has never put up with men like that,” Stephen said.

“Aye, but he’s a father to Little John now and soon goin’ to have a babe of his own.”

“Perhaps Catherine has calmed the warrior inside him,” Stephen suggested.

“Nay, the warrior is still there. He just has more to live for.”

“Indeed, he does,” Stephen agreed.

“Speakin’ of more to live for, what did ye think of Artis?”

“She’s a jewel, Bear. A lovely Scottish gem. Tell me about her and how you met her. Even more important, how did you convince her to marry a big ox like you?”

Bear briefly relayed how Artis grew up in the Highlands, close to the village where Bear’s parents lived. “She was forced to leave her home during the Highland clearances, when the Countess of Sutherland wanted her land cleared to make room for profitable sheep farming. Artis became an indentured servant on a Virginia plantation and then received land in Kentucky, located near William and Kelly’s place, as her freedom dues.” Then he told Stephen how they met and fell in love. He described their wedding in considerable detail and the home he built for her that they named Highland.

“I’m so happy for you both,” Stephen said.

“Our past and our future were entwined so tightly, we were destined to meet,” Bear concluded.

“Amazing story,” Stephen declared. “That would make a great

book."

"Artis is a bit of a romantic. Maybe she'll write it someday," Bear said, laughing. "I didn't even tell ye about the men who tried to take Artis from me. But I'll save that for another evenin' when we've shared a wee droppy or two. It's a tough story to tell, even for me."

"I'll look forward to it. You always were a great story teller."

Bear pointed to a doe and her fawn as they sprinted away to safety.

He glanced down to be sure Little John still slept soundly. The child's soft snores told Bear he was. "Did Sam tell ye their babe might be breech?" Bear asked quietly.

Stephen answered in a hushed voice, "He did. It's alarming. If something happened to Catherine, I don't know if Sam could survive."

"I agree. The thought of losin' her was his only fear before he finally allowed himself to love her," Bear said. "He's been through so much in his lifetime, but never somethin' this dangerous."

"And out of his control to stop it. Perhaps one day in the future, women will not have to put their own lives at stake to bring life into this world," Stephen said wistfully. "Every time Jane is due to deliver, my insides twist into knots."

"I fear Sam will be even worse."



"Oh!" Catherine exclaimed, holding her side, as Sam returned from watching Bear and Stephen leave.

Sam held his breath and strode over to her at once. "What is it?" he asked, holding both her shoulders in his hands.

"I just felt that ache again and I'm a bit woozy."

"Should I go get the midwife?" he asked.

Catherine shook her head. "No, she should be coming tomorrow. I just need to lie down."

Sam and Artis helped Catherine to their room and eased her onto the bed. Sam removed her satin slippers and then supported her back as she reclined on the bed and Artis covered her with a quilt. "I'll go

get Mrs. Wrigley," he said, leaving.

"Sam," he heard her say, "everything will be all right."

He made himself smile for her, turned around, and headed for the kitchen. "Mrs. Wrigley, Miss Henk, my wife is having that pain again. Will you please see if you can do anything for her?"

"Oh dear. Miss Henk, please brew her some of my mugwort tea," Mrs. Wrigley told the housekeeper. "Mind you, make the brew weak. Just a teaspoon will do."

"Come with me," Sam told Mrs. Wrigley.

The woman followed on Sam's heels, clucking to herself, but before she entered the room, she straightened and took a deep breath. The picture of calm, she approached Catherine with quiet assurance.

Unlike himself. His resolution to stay strong faded beneath the glaring intensity of his fears. A terrible sense of inadequacy swept over him. He felt completely useless and helpless. He didn't like the feeling one bit.

"So, that nasty ache decided to come back and prickle your side?" Mrs. Wrigley asked.

"Yes, stronger than ever," Catherine answered.

Sam didn't like the sound of that one bit.

"Did it get better when you laid down?" Mrs. Wrigley asked.

"Yes, it always does."

"What does that mean?" Sam demanded. His eyes flashed between Catherine, Artis, and Mrs. Wrigley.

Catherine and Artis remained silent and Mrs. Wrigley merely smiled sweetly at him.

"Someone please answer me," he insisted, his voice louder than he intended.

"Mr. Wyllie, will you let your sweet wife relax for a few minutes? I'll speak with you shortly, when Catherine finishes her tea," the cook suggested in a kind voice.

Why did women always want him to leave the room? This was

his babe too. But Mrs. Wrigley was right. Catherine needed to relax and there was little chance of that happening with him in the room. With his men gone, he needed to feed all the horses and other livestock anyway. It would take him some time. “I’ll go feed the stock. When I get back, I pray you will feel better,” he told Catherine, then he gave her a kiss on the forehead. His own brow creased as he smoothed wisps of hair away from her face—her skin felt moist, although it was quite chilly in their room.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to leave. “Come and get me if she worsens in any way,” he told Artis.

“Aye, I will.”

Reluctantly, he turned to leave.

Miss Henk passed him in the hall carrying a steaming cup of tea.

Please Lord, let it help her.



Catherine sat up in bed, her red bed pillows propped behind her back. She sipped the warm tea. “It tastes a bit bitter. What is this?” she asked.

“A weak tea of mugwort will quiet restlessness and worry,” Mrs. Wrigley answered. “Right now, it’s important for you and your babe to rest as much as possible. And it’s good for the insides of a woman too.”

Catherine remembered reading that when taken in small doses, mugwort had long been considered an herbal friend for women with particular benefit in regulating a woman’s monthly flow and easing the transition to change of life. Perhaps it would help.

“I know I’m not a midwife, I’m just a cook. But would you mind if I placed a hand where the pain hits you?”

“No, I would not mind. I would value your opinion,” Catherine said. “Help me out of my gown and I’ll show you the spot.”

Both women helped Catherine out of the gown and dressed only in her shift, Catherine laid back down. “It’s here.”

“Right under yer ribs?” Artis asked.

"Yes."

Mrs. Wrigley moved Catherine's long braid aside and placed her palm over the spot. The cook closed her eyes and gently felt the area. When she finished she opened her eyes and took hold of Catherine's hand.

"Put your palm here Catherine."

Catherine did as she said, but felt nothing but a large lump that more than filled her hand. Then realization struck. "That's not a foot."

"No, my dear. That is your babe's head."

Artis let out a little cry and covered her mouth. The anxious look on Artis' face told Catherine that Artis knew what this meant.

But her own mind refused to focus on anything but this special moment. "My boy's head?" Catherine eyes watered with tears as she realized her hand caressed the top of her sweet babe's head. Despite her fears, she felt a hot and overwhelming joy. She moved her hand in a gentle small circle. It felt as though she was actually touching him. *God, let this be only the first of many special moments I will share with my son.*

But her elation was short-lived. With a heart-clenching pang, the implications gradually sunk in. Danger for her baby. Danger for her. Her nerves instantly tensed as a terrible dread gripped her.

"The babe may still turn. Give him time," Mrs. Wrigley quickly told her, patting the hand Catherine still held to her side. Her face was full of quiet strength and a steadfast peace.

Catherine found the motherly woman's presence comforting. "Do you think so? Truly?"

"Oh yes, indeed I do. I've seen it happen many a time," Mrs. Wrigley said.

"Aye, I have as well. At the plantation, one of the young slaves was just as ye are. And the lass delivered a healthy girl," Artis said.

Their reassurances gave her some hope. She took a deep breath and tried to relax.

Catherine wondered what plantation Artis referred to, but didn't have the energy to ask. Her eyelids felt exceedingly heavy all of a

sudden, but she fought the urge to close them. “I have so much to do. The rest of Sam’s relatives will be arriving shortly. I so want everything to be perfect. I want to make this the best Christmas ever for everyone, especially Little John and the other children.”

“It will be dear one,” Mrs. Wrigley assured her. “We have everything under control. Miss Henk wrapped all the presents you bought for them in paper and pretty bows. The decorations you and Miss Henk made are merry and I’m cooking enough to feed even your large family.”

“Don’t forget to make apple dumplings for Bear and custard for William,” Catherine said.

“I won’t.” Mrs. Wrigley squeezed her hand.

“Artis, what’s your favorite Christmas sweet?” Catherine asked.

“Yer only concern should be restin’ ,” Artis said. “We’ve plenty of time to worry about such things later.”

“Rest does sound marvelous right now. I guess it’s the tea.” Her heavy eyelids closed and she heard Mrs. Wrigley’s voice fading away.

“That’s it, dear, let yourself rest.”

She would. They had most everything under control.

God had the rest.

Chapter 20

Bear spotted the wagon at the same time Stephen pointed ahead. He slowed a bit, disturbed by what he thought he saw. “Somethin’ is na right.”

Stephen lifted his long rifle from where it lay near his boots.

Bear shook Little John. “Wake up!”

Sam’s four men sat on the snowy ground, their hands and feet tied. They could see the tops of Martha and Polly’s heads at the front of the disabled wagon.

“Jane,” Stephen whispered. “I don’t see Jane.”

“It could be an ambush,” Bear cautioned. He surveyed the surrounding area with his keen eyes. “I do na see the prisoners either,” he said.

Stephen could hold back no longer. “Go!”

Bear snapped the reins and then snapped them again, urging the wagon team to a full run over the hundred yards or so to the other wagon.

“Bear!” Garvin yelled above the sound of the noisy wagon. “Help! The prisoners escaped!”

As Bear slowed the wagon team, Stephen leapt off the seat and vaulted into the back of the broken wagon, still leaning precariously to one side. The fire he had built nearby, earlier that morning, was now just a few glowing coals.

“Father!” Martha and Polly cried at once and stood up.

“Samuel? Where is he?” Stephen prodded.

“Under here,” Martha said, lifting a blanket up. Her green eyes were wide and glistening. “He was crying for Mother, and I didn’t know what to do, so I just kept him warm.”

While she spoke, Stephen glanced around frantically. “Where’s your Mother?”

“They took her!” Polly cried. “Those terrible men took her.” The child’s dark hair hung in disarray and her crystal blue eyes were red. “Get her back!” she screamed and then began sobbing.

Little John climbed up into the wagon and hugged first Polly and then Martha.

Bear peered over the side of the wagon.

His chest heaving, Stephen glared at Bear. “Son of a bitch!”

“We’ll find her, Stephen,” Bear said, trying to calm both Stephen’s fury and his own.

Stephen picked up Polly and hugged her. “Don’t worry honey, I’ll get her back.” He wrapped her in one of the blankets.

As soon as he realized the children were unharmed, Bear rushed over to the four men and untied them. “What the hell happened?” he asked Garvin.

Stephen sat Polly down again and jumped off the wagon. “You let them take my wife?” he demanded storming toward the four hands. “How could you let this happen?”

Garvin stood on stiff legs and dusted the snow off his bottom with his hat. “I am truly sorry Mr. Wyllie. We untied the prisoners to allow them to relieve themselves. Somehow Dixon managed to wrench away Matthew’s pistol. I tried to stop him, but he got to Mrs. Wyllie first and pointed the gun at her head.”

Stephen gasped and paled. Both girls started crying again.

“Go on,” Bear urged.

“Dixon threatened to kill her in front of her children if the rest of us didn’t put down our weapons. We did, of course, and the other fellow, Crowell, tied the four of us up,” Garvin explained.

“Why didn’t you untie these men?” Stephen asked Martha.

“Because the wicked man said he would kill Mother if I untied them,” she sobbed. “Did I do wrong?”

“I don’t blame her, Mr. Wyllie. Dixon was extremely convincing,” James said. “Even I believed him.”

“You didn’t do a thing wrong Martha. You were incredibly brave, and I need you to keep being brave. Okay?” Stephen told his oldest daughter.

“All right,” Martha said, biting her trembling lip. She placed her arm protectively around Polly’s shoulder.

“Which way did they go?” Stephen asked Garvin.

“North,” Garvin answered. “They took three of our horses.”

Bear scanned the area around them. Tied to long lead ropes, Stephen’s wagon team grazed on the leaves of dried brush. Another saddled horse stood nearby tied to a tree. “Whose horse is that?”

Harry spoke up. “It’s mine, Sir. Take him. He’s big, stout, and has a lot of go in him.”

“Harry, I thank ye for the borrow of yer horse. Get Stephen’s wagon wheel replaced as soon as you can. Then two of ye drive Stephen’s wagon team. The other two drive the wagon we brought. After they’ve eaten, take the children and the family’s belongings back to Sam’s at once,” Bear ordered.

Stephen untied George and then leapt onto the stallion’s broad back. “How long ago did they leave?” Sensing Stephen’s urgency, the horse turned in a tight circle and pranced, ready to run.

“Perhaps thirty minutes,” Garvin answered. “Here, take one of my pistols. You may need it.” Garvin extended the pistol up. “It’s loaded.”

Stephen stuck the weapon in his belt. Sam had drilled into them that there was no such thing as too many weapons in the wilderness.

Bear rode Harry’s horse over to Stephen’s wagon and spoke to Little John who still stood with the girls. “Can ye help these men guard yer cousins and take them to yer house?”

“Yes, Sir,” Little John told Bear. “Uncle Stephen, do you want me to tell my Pa anything?”

“Tell him we’ll need to dig two graves,” Stephen answered. “Nobody steals my wife and lives. Let’s go!”

He and Stephen took off. As the pitiful sound of the lasses' weeping faded, Bear's anger grew.

They both leaned forward and pushed their mounts to run even faster.



Early that morning, after profusely thanking Colonel Logan and his wife for their warm hospitality, William and his family pulled out of the fort's enclosure and took the road headed south. The weather was cold, but no snow fell from the sky and the wind, thankfully, was not blowing at all. William could tolerate cold, but a frigid wind always made him miserable. They were all dressed warmly and in a cheerful mood knowing they would arrive at Sam and Catherine's sometime that afternoon.

Riley slept on a warm blanket in the back of the wagon. It always amazed William how much a dog could sleep. Yet they could come awake instantly when they sensed danger.

Nicole rode in her favorite spot, in front of William, her little legs dangling on either side of his saddle. "Go, Smoke, go!" she said, pointing ahead.

William glanced over at his smiling wife. "Are you excited to see Sam, Catherine, and Little John again?" he asked.

Kelly looked up at him and said, "Of course. I miss all of them. And Stephen, Jane, and the girls too. It will be wonderful for all of us to be together again."

Kelly's gold tresses sparkled in the sun. When she turned her pretty blue eyes toward the road again, he found his gaze dropping from her eyes to her shoulders then to her curvy breasts.

The day he met her, when he rescued her from her attackers, she had been so thin. It was both the worst day of her life and the best day of his. He thought that perhaps he began loving her that same day. And every day since then, his love only deepened and grew stronger.

She grinned at him playfully, and looked as though she were wondering what he was thinking.

He wished he could tell her. He winked instead.

"You did bring your fiddle didn't you?" Rory asked him.

William hoped her father had missed the silent exchange between them.

“Indeed. I know a number of Christmas hymns and carols, including, ‘Hark! The Herald Angels Sing’ and ‘Joy to the World’,” William answered gleefully. Playing Christmas music on his violin always made his heart sing.

“I love those songs. You taught them to me,” Kelly told her father.

McGuffin broke out in song, his rich baritone voice, filling the woods around them and Kelly soon joined in.

“Joy to the world! The Lord is come;
Let earth receive her king;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.”

Even Nicole tried to join in, repeating the word ‘sing’ each time her mother and grandfather did.

William didn’t join in himself. He was enjoying listening to the three of them too much, especially Nicole.

The rest of the day passed quickly and peacefully as the four enjoyed the quiet and often spectacular scenery. At one point, they passed through a deep glen with steep limestone sides covered here and there with wood and brush growing right out of the rocks. Some of the limestone shelves rose to nearly fifty feet above them. Other areas flaunted large snow-covered meadows. Wild game often grazed in these fields, pawing through the snow to find dried grass.

Eventually, the scenery turned to heavier woods and looked like a winter wonderland. That’s when William knew they were nearing Sam and Catherine’s land. He and Kelly had made this trip only once before, but he recognized some of the landmarks that signaled they were on the enormous parcel of land. Even after Catherine gave Stephen and Jane a thousand acres, they still owned nine-thousand acres.

“We’re getting close, Nicole,” he told his little girl and tugged her close. She smiled up at him. He winked and kissed her rosy cheek.

Riley barked once, froze, and pointed his nose straight ahead.

William's head jerked up. Two men and a woman rode toward them. He wondered who they were and if they were headed to Fort Logan. "Rory, is your rifle loaded?" he asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Kelly, yours?"

"Yes, and my pistol too."

"Both of you keep your weapons within easy reach. We have no idea who these people are," William cautioned. "Kelly, take Nicole." He pulled alongside the wagon bench and handed over his daughter. "Put her in the back."

Kelly leaned into the wagon and sat Nicole down on a folded blanket. "Take a nap now honey."

Tired from their exciting journey, Nicole laid her head down at once.

Peering down the road, William continued to study the strangers.

The two men suddenly stopped their horses and appeared to say something to the woman. William thought he saw her nod. She looked strangely familiar, but from this distance, all he could see was that the woman had an abundance of long red hair.

Kelly stared ahead. "That woman looks a lot like Jane."

Kelly's younger eyes must be better than his. "Are you certain?" he asked.

"I'll be able to tell you for sure in a few more feet," she answered. After a couple of minutes she said, "It is her! But I don't recognize the two men."

"What would Jane be doing on this road with two men we don't know?" Rory asked. "Something's wrong."

William had his suspicions, but he hoped they weren't true. "Act as though you don't recognize her. Hopefully Jane will catch on and remain quiet," he told them. "Let's just see what those two men have to say."

William pulled out his rifle and kept it across his lap as the three riders drew closer.

“Greetings, good folks,” one of the men called out as they approached.

Jane stared straight into William’s eyes. He gave her a subtle nod.

“Good day to you, Sirs, and lady,” William replied.

“It is a fine day,” the same man said. “Where are you headed?”

“Oh, we’re on our way to Crab Orchard to visit my wife’s sister for the holidays, but I think we took a wrong turn somewhere,” William lied. “There’s another fork up ahead somewhere that should get us there.”

Riley growled at the two men from deep in his chest. When he lifted a lip and snarled at them the two men quickly started on their way again.

“Well, you good folks have a pleasant journey,” the same man said and kicked his horse.

The three moved past them, and Jane stared straight ahead, her wide eyes the only sign of her unease.

When they were five yards or so away, William whispered to Kelly, “Get in the back and lie on top of Nicole.”

Kelly quietly did as he told her and then he nodded to Rory, who raised his rifle as William did.

“Hold it right there!” William yelled, cocking his rifle. “You men put your hands in the air. Now!”

Rory cocked his rifle as well. “We have two long rifles pointed at your backs. We don’t miss,” he said in a gruff voice.

The two men did as they were told.

William addressed Jane. “Get back here Jane. Wait in front of the wagon team.”

She rode her horse to the front of the team and turned to face them. “They are escaped prisoners of Sam’s,” Jane told him. “Be

careful William. They just said they would kill all of you if I said a word to warn you."

"Toss your pistols to the ground," William told the two.

They each tossed one pistol.

"All of them!" William shouted.

Two more pistols hit the snow.

"Dismount and lie on the ground, face down."

The man who had remained silent until now spoke up. "Mister, what's got into you? You don't look like a robber to me."

"Shut up, Crowell. He's no robber," the other man said.

"So, he's Crowell," William said, as the men dismounted. "What is your name, Sir?" he asked the other.

"Wesley Dixon," he begrudgingly replied. "And just who the hell are you?" Dixon started to roll over.

"Keep your face down!" he ordered. "I'm Sheriff William Wyllie of Boonesborough. And more importantly, the brother-in-law of the woman you have stolen. Jane, did these men harm you in any way?"

"Not yet, William," she said, her voice hot with anger, "but I have no doubt they would have."

"Why did they abduct you?" William asked her, keeping his eyes on the two men.

"I'm not entirely sure what the whole story is. Our wagon broke a wheel, and Stephen went to Sam's to get another wagon early this morning. Sam's four men came along taking these two to the jail at Fort Harrod. Stephen asked Sam's hands to stay with us until he could get back with Sam's wagon and a new wheel. While Stephen was gone, Sam's men untied their prisoners to allow them to answer nature's call. Then that man," she pointed to Dixon, "managed to steal the pistol of one of the hands. Then the bloody bastard held the gun to my head." Her voice broke and she swallowed before continuing. "They forced me to go with them."

"Why didn't Sam's men help you?"

Jane pointed to Dixon. “They were afraid he’d kill me. And I believe he would have. The other one, tied them all up.”

“Are your children safe and sound?” Kelly asked.

“They were when I left,” Jane replied, “but they were all crying and scared out of their wits, and cold from spending the night in the open air.”

He dismounted and moved to stand in front of the two men, his rifle pointed at Dixon’s head. “Why did you take this woman from her family?”

Enraged, William’s jaw quivered while he waited for an explanation.

Rory got out of the wagon and pointed his weapon at the other man’s head.

“I wanted to trade her for a signed deed,” Dixon finally said. “The deed to Wyllie Mountain in New Hampshire. We tried to reason with Captain Wyllie, but he wouldn’t listen. So we thought if we took his son to our cabin perhaps he would listen to reason and accept our more than generous offer. But he found the boy and even though we hadn’t harmed a hair on his head, he took us prisoner, beat Crowell, and threatened us with severe penalties and imprisonment. Then we encountered Captain Wyllie’s brother and his family’s broken down wagon on the road. When the hands greeted the family, I figured out that it was Captain Sam’s brother and his family. When we escaped, I saw a chance to try again. But this time I thought to get his brother Stephen to persuade the Captain. If we held Stephen’s wife, I thought he would fear for her life and could be more persuasive with Captain Wyllie than we were.”

“Is my nephew unharmed?” William demanded.

“You kidnapped Little John?” Jane asked, incredulous and bristling.

“It wasn’t kidnapping per se. More like a trade. We just wanted to exchange him for the signed deed. We were never going to hurt the child. Or you,” Dixon answered. “Actually, we’re trying to help your family by paying top dollar for the land. But *Bloody Hand* wouldn’t listen.”

“What fools you are,” William said. “Sam earned that name for a

reason. Frankly, I'm surprised he didn't run you through with that big knife of his for kidnapping his son. And this woman's husband will justifiably want to string you up from the nearest tree. You know, I just might let him. He *can* be quite *'persuasive'*."

Crowell whimpered and Dixon's mouth twisted into a sneer as he said, "You wouldn't dare. We work for some exceedingly powerful men back east. I assure you they are well connected to those at the highest levels of our government."

The insolence in Dixon's voice made William's temper surge. "I have news for you—this is Kentucky—and we don't answer to men from back east."

"And our government does not employ kidnappers!" Rory bellowed. "Or men who abduct women!" He flashed Dixon a look of utter contempt. "They deserve to be shot, William."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure right now. But, there's more to this story than their pack of smooth lies." He needed these two to find out what it was. He vowed to learn who sent these two, and why they were so desperate to get Sam to sign over his land. But now was not the time or place.

"Kelly, give your pistol to Jane, and then get Nicole and put her on the wagon seat with you," William said.

Kelly promptly did as he asked, wrapping their daughter protectively in a blanket and snuggling Nicole in her arms.

After Jane held the weapon, he told her and Rory, "Keep your weapons on them while I tie 'em up. Don't hesitate to kill them if they make a move."

He pulled some rope from his saddle bag and spent the next few minutes securely tying their hands behind the two men. Then he let the back gate to the wagon down and told them, "Get in."

As soon as the two managed to squirm themselves into the back, William tied their feet together too.

"But what if we need to relieve ourselves?" Crowell asked.

"That's exactly how they got Garvin to untie them. They said they needed to relieve themselves!" Jane declared as she rode up next to the back of the wagon.

“You will just have to wet yourselves,” William replied. “You already stink like a pair of skunks anyway.”

At that, Riley, who was still in the back of the wagon, growled, lifted his leg and sprinkled first one and then the other.

Dixon and Crowell both stared at the dog in disbelief.

Riley’s opinion of the two kidnappers made them all burst into laughter, despite the seriousness of the situation.

Chapter 21

Shouting woke Catherine from her rest. “Now what?” she said aloud. She sat up as quickly as she could manage and put her pregnancy-swollen feet into her house slippers. It was Sam’s voice. What was wrong? She opened the door to the bedroom and hurriedly made her way to the front room.

“Damn it!” Sam swore as he paced.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Wyllie,” Garvin said. “I wanted to tell you before the children came inside. They were scared witless. Martha wouldn’t even untie us because that man said he would kill her mother if she did.”

“Sorry? You four men not only let your prisoners escape, you let them steal Jane away! How could you be so irresponsible?” Sam demanded heatedly. “If she dies at their hands, I’ll....” He stopped speaking when Catherine entered the room.

“What’s happened to Jane?” Catherine asked, not believing what she’d just heard.

Artis, Mrs. Wrigley, and Miss Henk rushed in and stood by watching anxiously too.

“The prisoners have escaped and taken Jane hostage,” Sam answered, his voice hot. “Stephen and Bear went after them. Our four men brought the children back.”

The cook and the housekeeper both gasped and Artis stepped closer to Catherine and laid a hand on her arm.

“The children?” Catherine asked Garvin.

“They’re unharmed,” he answered. “Just cold and scared.”

Holding his undersized rifle in one hand, Little John opened the door and let Martha in. She carried her brother Samuel with some difficulty. Still crying, Polly followed Martha inside.

“Ye must be Martha,” Artis said. “I’m Bear’s new wife, Artis. Let me help ye and take yer brother. The lad looks heavy.”

Martha nodded but didn’t say anything.

Artis took Samuel from Martha and then both girls ran to Catherine’s outstretched arms and hugged her.

Catherine embraced them and kissed the tops of their heads as she held them close. She looked over at Little John, who stood nearby, and motioned him to her as well.

Artis sat down with baby Samuel in her lap. The rosy-cheeked little boy grabbed a fistful of her long wavy tresses with his chubby hands.

As Catherine hugged and kissed the girls and Little John, she couldn’t help but watch Samuel. He looked so sweet sitting there playing with Artis’ hair. Would she be able to hold her own son soon? *Please, God.*

Catherine returned her attention to the girls who still held onto her hands.

“They took my mother,” Polly cried, gazing up at Catherine with tear-filled eyes.

“That wicked man pointed a gun at her head,” Martha told Sam. “I was so frightened.”

“That bastard!” Sam swore. He stood there fuming while Miss Henk helped the children out of their coats, hats, and scarves. As she freed them of their heavy woolen coverings, he gave each of them a big hug.

Sam began to pace. Catherine could clearly see how troubled he was. Jane’s life was at risk. And so were Stephen and Bear’s. She could almost see Sam’s mind racing. He wanted to go with his men to help with Jane’s rescue. But he wouldn’t leave her no matter how hard she tried to persuade him to go.

“Warm yourselves by the fire children,” Mrs. Wrigley told them kindly. “Everything will be all right. We’ll have some warm milk and cookies for you in no time.”

The girls and Little John all sat down cross-legged on the rug near the fireplace. “She makes the best cookies,” Little John whispered

to them.

Harry, Matthew, and James started bringing in the family's belongings and quietly set everything near the front door. They tried to leave but then stopped abruptly at the sound of Sam's heated voice.

"You three, over here," Sam barked.

The three hands turned to face Sam, their faces apprehensive. Garvin had remained frozen in front of Sam, hat in hand, but he spoke up for the group. "Mr. Wyllie, I can't express how sorry we all are. But Dixon fooled us, and then he stole the weapon and the next thing we knew Crowell had us all hogtied."

"On second thought, let's go outside," Sam grumbled, and then stormed toward the door. The four men followed him onto the porch.

Catherine suspected Sam didn't want the men to say anything in front of Martha and Polly that might scare the girls. His wrath would also likely make him prone to swearing.

After the men left, Catherine sat down in Sam's chair which was closer to the children. "I am so sorry this happened girls. But if I know Stephen and Bear, they will soon return with your mother."

"They better," Martha said, her lip quivering and green eyes intense.

Catherine could see that the ten-year-old was more angry than afraid.

"They will," Little John said.

"How do you know?" Polly asked. A tear trickled down her cold-reddened cheek. The opposite of her sister, she was more afraid than angry.

"I know your father. And I know Uncle Bear. They're brave and strong. They won't let a couple of bad men hurt your mother," he answered.

"I agree," Catherine said.

Sam threw the door open so hard it banged against the wall and the youngsters all jumped. He shook his head as he closed the door. "I'm sorry children. I didn't mean to do that. I'm just so angry at those two men for taking Jane."

“I’m mad too!” Martha declared.

“Aye, ‘tis infuriating!” Artis agreed.

“Catherine, I’m sending our four hands after Stephen and Bear. Perhaps they will be able to help, then they can proceed on to Fort Harrod as planned. As soon as they get fresh horses saddled, they’re leaving.”

“I hope you weren’t too hard on your men, Sam,” Catherine said.

“No. Dixon is a conniving bastard and as slippery as an eel.”

“Indeed,” she agreed. “And just as repulsive.”

“How are you feeling?” Sam asked her.

“Much better now,” she said and smiled.

“Glad to hear it,” he told her.

Sam stood in front of the children. “Martha, Polly, I don’t want you to worry too much. Your father and Bear will bring your mother back. I know my brothers, and those two weasels don’t stand a chance.”

“That’s exactly what I told them when you were outside,” Little John said.

“And you’re both right,” Catherine said, giving Martha’s shoulder a pat.

Sam knelt, gripped Polly’s hand, and gently squeezed it. “I’m going to go hurry my men along. I would go too, but I need to stay to take care of Catherine and guard all of you. You’re safe here, I promise.”

“Thank you, Uncle Sam,” Polly said with a sniffle.

“My brothers will be back with your mother before you know it.” Sam stood and turned his eyes toward Catherine. “I going to do some work outside. Send Artis to get me if you need me.” He leaned over, gave her a kiss on the forehead, and left carrying his long rifle and pistols.

Catherine needed a way to entertain the children and keep them distracted from the ordeal their mother was experiencing. “Children,

what do you say, should we ask your Aunt Artis to tell us all about her home in Scotland?" Catherine asked. "We've learned a little about Scotland from Bear, but I'm sure Artis could tell us even more and we can all get to know her better."

Artis' face lit up at the mention of her former home. She glanced over at Catherine and smiled. Then a hint of sadness filled her eyes for a moment or two before she shook her head and it disappeared.

Sometime while Artis was visiting, Catherine wanted to learn what had caused such melancholy to appear in the woman's striking green eyes. Her strong profile and proud bearing held an inherent strength that she suspected was a result of some suffering, yet Artis appeared gentle, serenely wise, and stunningly beautiful.

"Would you, Aunt Artis, please?" Little John asked.

"Aye, but I must warn ye. I might scare ye with my descriptions of loch monsters and dragons on the moor," Artis said, making her eyes wide.

Little John scooted a little closer to Artis' knees.

The two girls turned to face Artis, appearing intrigued. It was good to see something on their young faces besides fear and sadness. Both girls were exceptionally pretty, but Martha had her mother's fiery copper locks that curled in every direction. Her hair was in even greater disarray than normal, giving her a delightfully wild look. Polly appeared tired and mellow, unlike her typically high-spirited self.

"Bear told us that there are fairies in Scotland," Martha said. "Is it true?"

"Well, if Bear said it, then 'tis true," Artis said, giggling a little. She glanced at Catherine and winked.

"Your hair is so pretty," Polly said, gazing up at Artis. "It's like cinnamon and butter mixed together."

Baby Samuel must have agreed because he still appeared fascinated by the fistful of Artis' hair in his hand. Perhaps it was the unique color that captivated the child.

Artis grinned at Polly. "Thank ye, Polly. I like yer hair too, ye wee fey lass. 'Tis nearly as black as my bearskin blanket."

"What's fey mean?" Polly asked.

“It means ye remind me of a whimsical fairy yerself.”

“You have a bearskin?” Little John asked.

“Aye. Bear made it and ‘tis the warmest blanket I’ve ever had,” Artis answered.

“How’d he get it?” Martha asked.

“Well now, that’s a story Bear should tell. He tells it far better than I,” Artis said.

Mrs. Wrigley brought in a large tray filled to overflowing with bread and butter, cookies, biscuits and wild grape preserves, and assorted tarts. Miss Henk followed her in carrying a tray of mugs filled with steaming sweetened milk. She gave each child a small towel to eat on and they all grabbed an assortment of treats and then sat down again. Catherine was starving, as she nearly always was since the babe starting growing so fast. She took a slice of warm bread and slathered it with the preserves. Artis wanted only a shortbread cookie.

Mrs. Wrigley took baby Samuel from Artis saying she would feed him and see if his cloth needed changing. Samuel started crying as the cook carried him to the kitchen, evidently not wanting to leave Artis. Catherine couldn’t blame the boy. She looked like an angel with the firelight dancing on her long hair.

“How cold does it get in Scotland?” Polly asked, chewing a tart. “As cold as here?”

“Oh, aye. Much worse. My grandfather and great-uncle told me of the worst winter ever. All the aged among us never remembered anythin’ like it. It happened in the year 1674, on twelve days in December. It was the most dire storm imaginable. At the beginnin’ of it, there were fierce storms and snow. Then a terrible wind from the east caused great loss of ships on the sea. And docked ships, large and small, were cast away like wee toys.”

“Then what happened?” Little John asked, already appearing enthralled.

“Then, a most harsh frost followed that covered the highlands and moors. The wee birds fell down from the air dead, frozen in flight. Even the big ravens died. The rats all froze in great numbers and later great piles of their bodies were found. Most of the sheep and cows died too. All the casks of ale froze and could not be drunk to warm the

insides of the people. Even the contents of the chamber-pots froze solid."

The children all giggled.

"'Tis true!" Artis declared. "After the terrible frost, it snowed for ten straight days and never once halted. The loch and all the fresh waters stayed frozen solid for two full months."

"What's a loch?" Polly asked.

"'Tis a vast and beautiful body of water," Artis answered. "In Scotland we have many lochs. Their color is so blue and clear in the summer that they often made us want to weep from pure joy."

"Joy can make you cry?" Polly asked. "I never had that happen."

"Aye, it can. Happy tears fall when yer heart is so full of love it needs to let a wee bit of it out. I was that happy when I married Bear. I wept like a wee bairn," Artis said. "Even Bear shed a tear or two of happiness."

"Bear?" the children all asked at once, sounding skeptical.

Artis only smiled knowingly.

Catherine believed it. Bear seemed deeply in love. It thrilled her to know that he finally found his true love. He deserved happiness.

"I'm glad you married Bear," Martha said.

"Me too," Little John said. "But what about the monster in the lake? I mean loch."

"Well now, here's the strange story as told to many generations of Scotland's children. I learned it as a young lass myself from my dear father. God rest his gentle soul."

As Artis began, the animation in her voice was enchanting. The children all shifted a little closer. Even Catherine was pulled in by her charm.

"An Irish monk named Saint Columba was visitin' his companions in Scotland when he came across the locals buryin' a poor young fellow. The monk asked them why they appeared so frightened. They all started speakin' at once and he could na understand their blatherin'. So he asked the oldest man there to speak. He explained

that they had just watched in horror as a huge water beast with a long thin neck and a humped back attacked their companion while he was swimmin', mauled him, and dragged him under. Then they bravely took a boat out to try to rescue the lad."

"Did they find him?" Polly asked.

"Alas, they only drug up his cold corpse."

"The poor fellow," Martha said.

"What happened then?" Little John asked.

Artis raised her brows. "Hearing this story, Saint Columba straightaway marched to the edge of the loch, made the sign of the Cross, and invoked the holy name of God. Then he shouted out onto the loch in a great booming voice."

"What did he yell?" Martha asked.

Making her voice louder, Artis answered, "St. Columba ordered the monster to kill no more and sent him away."

"Did he go away?" Polly asked.

"Aye, he did, for many years, but then…" she paused.

"Then?" Little John pressed.

"When St. Columba went to heaven, the monster returned."

"He did?" Polly asked in a squeaky voice, her eyes wide.

"Indeed, and ever since, many have spotted the immense creature plungin' into and out of the great depths of the loch. And many are sorely frightened of the fearsome beast. Although he has na killed another man, woman or…child…since, some have mysteriously disappeared."

"Have *you* seen the creature?" Little John asked. His straight blonde hair hung down in his excited eyes.

He would need a haircut before Christmas Catherine noted.

"I can na say for certain, but one mornin' when I took my walk along the loch's shores…" Artis paused and then grippingly looked each of them in the eye.

“What?” Little John nearly demanded.

“Tell us, please,” Polly pleaded.

“…I saw somethin’ enormous, rollin’ and dippin’ on the surface of the sparkling water, but it moved so fast, I could na tell for sure what it was. But I tell ye one thing,” she said.

“What?” all three children asked.

“I would na go swimmin’ near there ever again,” she concluded. “For if I did, I might just disappear from this world, never to be seen again.”

“Oh my,” Catherine said, enthralled herself.

Then she said, “Oh my,” again, but for an entirely different reason.

Chapter 22

William was still laughing at Riley's antics when he heard two riders approaching at a thunderous pace. His laughter broke off as did the others and everyone quietly watched the riders draw near.

He squinted into the distance. "That looks like…"

"It's Stephen and Bear," Kelly declared.

"Good," Jane said, her face stern. "They can help us hang them."

Crowell sniveled and Dixon frowned, his eyes heated under drawn brows.

Jane had been madder than an angered hornet earlier, but William was certain she realized he would never hang the men without a trial.

He wasn't so sure about Stephen though. Or Bear. Neither one was bound by the code that a man of the law must follow. They were bound by the unwritten code of the frontier—a man always held the right, without question, to defend himself and his family.

He'd once seen Stephen's rage unleashed upon a vicious man who dared to hurt Jane. It was an unstoppable rage. And Bear was so protective of his family, there was no telling what he might do.

"Jane!" he heard Stephen yell.

Jane urged her horse to gallop toward her husband. "Stephen!" she called as she rode toward him.

When the two reached each other, they both swiftly dismounted and ardently embraced.

William knew enormous relief filled his brother's heart. Stephen loved Jane dearly.

Bear continued coming toward William's wagon, giving the two a moment of privacy.

“I see ye have captured our two snakes, brother,” Bear said.

“We did,” William said, remounting Smoke.

Bear nodded to Rory and Kelly and then rode closer to the wagon. Like an angry giant, his face reddened and his flinty eyes narrowed, Bear peered down at the two men. “I ought to skin you two head to toe and then hang ye upside down for the wolves to finish off,” he growled.

Crowell paled and looked like he might heave.

Dixon’s mouth took on an unpleasant twist as he glared back at Bear. “You don’t frighten me.”

William shook his head. Was Dixon just an imbecile? He ought to be afraid. Exceedingly afraid.

“That one’s brains are in his ballocks,” Bear said pointing a finger at Dixon.

“Bear, we’ll deal with these two later. Will you help me control Stephen if he loses him temper?” William asked.

“I’m na so sure we shouldn’t let Stephen have his way with them,” Bear answered. “’Tis a man’s right to defend his family.”

“The world would be better off without that pair,” Rory said.

“Agreed, but that is not for us to decide,” William said.

“Maybe it is,” Bear said. “I will na abide these two threatenin’ our family a third time. As long as they’re alive, will any of our women and children be safe? They are obviously desperate. I do na believe they will give up. But what they want, Sam will never give.”

“I agree, he won’t,” William said. “That mountain is sacred to him. To all of us.”

“Please, Mr. Wyllie,” Crowell pleaded, “I don’t want to die. Taking her was Mr. Dixon’s idea, not mine.”

Dixon tried to kick Crowell with his tied feet and Riley snapped at him.

“Did they wet themselves?” Bear asked, noticing the wet spots on their pants.

“No, Riley already passed judgment on the two,” William answered.

Bear threw back his head and let out a great boom of laughter. “I knew that dog was smart.”

“How are Stephen and Jane’s children? Is their babe all right?” Kelly asked Bear as soon as he finished chuckling.

“Aye, the bairn is fine. But he’s na a wee babe anymore. Ye should see the size of the lad. The lasses were frightened and worried for their Mum. But they should be at Sam and Catherine’s by now. Sam’s men took them back. The women will get them warmed up and Mrs. Wrigley will fill their bellies to near burstin’.”

“Let me go talk to Stephen,” William told Bear. “Wait here.”

William rode up to Jane and Stephen and then stepped off of Smoke. “Jane told you that I have recaptured the prisoners?” he asked Stephen, keeping his voice and manner calm.

Stephen released Jane from his arms and took a quick step toward William. “Yes. Let’s go hang them.” Fury filled his fiery eyes.

“Stephen, we can’t. They’re my prisoners now. I am bound by duty and honor to take them back to Fort Harrod for trial.”

“That’s fine for you, but I’m compelled by duty and honor to make them pay for abducting my wife and my nephew!” Stephen shouted.

“I promise you, I will personally escort them and they will remain tied until they are lying on the floor of a jail cell there. Only then will I remove the ropes. I will then see them put in shackles before I ever leave the jail.”

A swift dark shadow swept across Stephen’s face. “What if they escape again?”

“I know the sheriff at Fort Harrod. He’s a good man with a solid reputation. He didn’t get that by being careless with prisoners.”

“I think you should listen to William,” Jane told Stephen.

Stephen eyed his wife, his eyes blazing.

William could see his brother’s thoughts racing dangerously.

Stephen shook his head vehemently. “No, damn it! They could have killed you. No man puts a hand on my wife.”

Jane placed a calming hand on Stephen’s forearm. “Stephen, in the end, I am not hurt. Neither is Little John. God protected us and now we must see justice done.”

“And I need them alive,” William added. “Someone sent these men. I need to find out who and why.”

Stephen swallowed hard and seemed as if he were fighting hard for self-control. Then he lifted his chin and boldly met William’s gaze. “All right, but I want your promise that if they do escape, you will hunt them down with me and kill them.”

William took a deep breath before he answered. “I promise I will hunt them down. What happens from there depends on the circumstances. But a prisoner who escapes twice will get little mercy from me.”

Stephen hesitated for a moment and then embraced him. “Thank you for saving Jane.” His voice broke. “I don’t know if I could live if something had happened to her.” Stephen released him and swallowed, fighting to control his emotions.

William laid a hand on Stephen’s shoulder. “It didn’t Stephen. We are all going to be fine. And I heard a rumor that there’s a Christmas celebration about to happen. What do you say I get these two snakes to Fort Harrod and then we all put this behind us?”

“You think they will be punished severely?” Stephen asked.

“I do,” William said. “I’ll recommend it and ask Judge Webb to do the same. He can write a letter to the judge at Harrodsburg.”

“Let’s go tell the others it’s time to go,” Jane said. She seemed as anxious as William was to end this before Stephen did something rash that he would later regret.

The three mounted and trotted their horses to the wagon.

As Bear had done, Stephen rode up to the back of the wagon and glowered at Dixon and Crowell. He sat there, tall and angry, his jaw hardened, letting his eyes convey the vehemence still boiling within him.

Crowell paled. “I’m sorry.” The man looked like he was about to

cry.

“Which one of these men pointed the pistol at your head?” Stephen asked Jane.

Jane pointed to Dixon.

“Are you sorry?” Stephen asked Dixon through clenched teeth.

“It’s your family that will be sorry for not selling me that land,” Dixon replied recklessly.

“Are you daring to threaten our family again, you wretched shit-sack?” Stephen demanded.

Dixon merely smoldered in silence.

Stephen yanked out his pistol and leaned down, holding the weapon just inches from Dixon’s graying temple. The ominous sound of the weapon being cocked echoed around them.

McGuffin tugged Riley closer to him and held the dog against the front of the wagon. Kelly turned away and leaned downward, clutching Nicole tightly against her breast, shielding their daughter from what might be about to happen.

William hoped it wouldn’t.

He watched his brother carefully, but knew Stephen was a man of his word. His brother agreed to let him take the prisoners to Fort Harrod. Stephen wouldn’t go back on his word. At least he hoped he wouldn’t.

“How does it feel you pathetic excuse of a man? How does it feel knowing your life might end in the next second?” Stephen’s voice was growing hotter. His face looked like a threatening thundercloud about to burst with all the fury of nature. “Apologize to my wife, now!” he spat.

Dixon sat up and turned around looking for Jane. Was the man finally going to do something smart?

Jane moved the horse she rode up next to Stephen’s mount and glared down at Dixon waiting for him to speak. They were all waiting.

When Dixon finally spoke his voice held an undertone of cold condescension. “Mrs. Wyllie, I regret that you were caught up in this

ill-fated attempt to persuade Captain Wyllie to sell us his land. If only he could have been more reasonable and cooperated, none of this needed to happen. Perhaps all of you can convince him that it is in your family's best interest to sell that property to us. It is of no value to you here. I am prepared to pay top dollar."

"That…was not…an apology!" Stephen sputtered, bristling with barely controlled fury.

The two men exchanged a long deep look, challenging each other.

William was about to say something before this could escalate further, but Bear spoke to Dixon first.

"Ye blithering idiot. Are ye trying to go out of your way to piss everyone off with yer dumb arse remarks?"

Dixon sighed heavily but said nothing.

Bear glared fiercely at the man. "I am only a ballock's hair away from removing yer manhood from ye. Apologize now!"

"I am sorry, Mrs. Wyllie. Please forgive me," he uttered stiffly as he stared straight ahead.

The line of Stephen's mouth tightened even further, but he uncocked the weapon.

Anger lit Jane's green eyes as she faced Dixon. "I could forgive you for taking me, but for kidnapping Little John and scaring my little girls, I will never forgive you," she swore. "For what you've done, I suggest you beg God for forgiveness."

Chapter 23

Sam returned from his chores and was surprised to find the children alone in the front room. Little John was holding out some of his latest treasures for Martha and Polly to inspect.

"Little John, where's your mother?"

"I think Artis took her to your bedroom," Little John said. His son's face looked worried again. That was not a good sign.

"Is something wrong?" he asked his son.

"She just said 'Oh my,' and then held her stomach," Martha volunteered.

"Her side or her stomach?"

"Here," Little John said, pointing to the front of his belly.

Sam stormed out of the room and down the hall. He threw the bedroom door open and found Artis leaning over Catherine, placing a pillow behind his wife. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

"I think she may have started her labor," Artis said.

"Why didn't you come to get me?"

"I was just about to," Artis said. "I think we should fetch the midwife. Do ye want me to do it?"

Sam moved closer to Catherine and took her hand in his. "Is it your time my love?" Although he found it difficult, he tried to keep his voice calm and reassuring.

"Yes, Sam, it is. Our son is coming." Catherine closed her eyes as she winced.

"Artis, go get Mrs. Wrigley. Tell her to come quickly," Sam instructed.

Artis flew out of the room and Sam told Catherine. “Tell me what we need to do and I’ll see that it’s done.”

“I think Artis is right. It’s time to ask Mrs. Smith to come. Then we need to get me out of this gown and do whatever Mrs. Wrigley thinks needs doing. She has nearly a dozen grown children. She would know better than I.”

“You’re right about that. I hate to send Miss Henk to retrieve the mid-wife, but I can’t bear to leave you right now. Do you think she would be all right? No, on second thought, I should go.”

“I want you here with me Sam. I’ll be frightened without you. But don’t send Miss Henk. She’s a bit faint-hearted and not an experienced rider. But Artis is, send her.”

“Are you sure? Mrs. Smith’s hamlet is easy to find, and Artis should be able to get there and back before dark, but still. If something happened, Bear would never forgive me. And I wouldn’t blame him.”

“Nothing’s going to happen. She’s an experienced rider and I get the sense she is well used to taking care of herself. She seems to be one strong lass.”

“Aye, I am a strong lass,” Artis agreed, coming into the room with Mrs. Wrigley behind her. “Are ye worried about me goin’ to fetch the mid-wife?”

“I was. Only because you don’t know these woods,” Sam admitted. “I should go.”

“Nay, ye stay with Catherine. She needs ye now more than ever,” Artis argued.

Mrs. Wrigley moved them both away and bent over Catherine. “What are you feeling dear lady? Is it the same pain you’ve been having?”

“No. This was different. My entire stomach felt like someone grabbed it with a strong fist.”

“Has it happened again?” Mrs. Wrigley asked.

“No, not yet.”

“If it’s going to happen again, it will be soon. If it doesn’t, then

‘tis just a false alarm. It happens often,” Mrs. Wrigley said, sounding wise and motherly.

“Then should we wait to see if it happens again before we go get Mrs. Smith?” Sam asked.

“That would be wise,” Mrs. Wrigley advised.

“Well, if ye need me to get the midwife, just say so,” Artis said.

“A full moon or approaching weather can bring on practice contractions,” the cook explained. “I suspect that is what’s happening. Let’s wait and see. Would you like some of my mugwort tea?”

“That would be most welcome,” Catherine said. “Mrs. Wrigley where is baby Samuel? Is he all right?”

“Oh, Miss Henk is have a delightful time caring for the little one. I’ve never seen her so happy. And the other three children are entertaining one another in the front room, warm and cozy. The last time I peeked in, Mister John was showing his cousins a rock speckled with ‘diamonds’.” Mrs. Wrigley chuckled and then left, her skirts swooshing as she hurried out the bedroom door.

Catherine turned her eyes to Sam. “Mrs. Wrigley’s tea always makes me sleepy. I just need to rest a while. Why don’t you take the girls out to see the new foal? I’ll send Artis for you if I have another pain.”

“You’re sure?” Sam asked.

“Yes, Sam. Kiss me and then leave,” she said smiling.

He made Artis promise to come get him at any sign of Catherine growing uncomfortable, then kissed Catherine and left.

After they donned their coats, Martha, Polly and Little John marched behind him in a row as he headed for the barn, praying for a miracle.



Bear rode beside William, behind the wagon so they could keep an eye on the two miserable prisoners. Rory rode the horse Jane had ridden, and Stephen rode beside him. The two men conversed about anything and everything, mostly politics and Stephen’s cattle operation. It was unlike Stephen to be so talkative, but Bear guessed

that his mood was buoyant now that Jane was safe.

Jane now sat beside Kelly, holding Nicole. The two women chattered excitedly, barely pausing to take a breath. Bear smiled, certain Kelly and Jane were torturing the prisoners with their endless jabbering.

“How far do you think we are now?” William asked.

“We’re gettin’ close. Na more than an hour,” Bear answered. “I’ll be pleased to share a wee droppy of brandy with ye when we get there. Nothin’ like it to warm a man’s insides.”

“I won’t be going to Sam’s just yet,” William said. “I promised Stephen I would escort these two weasels to Fort Harrod. In fact, isn’t that the turn off up ahead?”

As William pointed to the Harrodsburg road, Bear noticed four men riding toward them. “Look,” Bear said.

“It must be Sam’s men,” William suggested. “He probably sent them to help you and Stephen recover the prisoners.”

A few minutes later, at the fork in the road, the four hands pulled their horses to a stop in front of them.

“Sam sent us to help apprehend the prisoners,” Garvin said. Both he and the other men and their mounts were breathing hard.

“Too late,” Stephen said, “They’re hog-tied in the back of William’s wagon.”

“Mrs. Wyllie, are you hurt?” Garvin asked.

“No, Mr. Cotter, I am well, thanks to William,” Jane said.

“Well, we’ll take the prisoners off your hands and get them to Fort Harrod,” Garvin offered. “Captain Wyllie wants us to escort them to the jail and then take our Christmas holiday there.”

“Your help will be welcome,” William said, “but they are my prisoners now. I will be turning them over to the sheriff at Fort Harrod.”

“Anything you need us to do, we’ll do it,” James said. The other three men nodded their heads in agreement, appearing eager to help.

“Perhaps I should come along too,” Bear suggested.

“No, Bear. I want you and Stephen to guard my family and Jane,” William said. “I’ll be back in two days with an armful of presents.”

“Aye, I’ll stay with them. But if I’m na goin’, I need to ask ye to do me a favor.”

“Of course.”

Bear motioned William aside to speak to him privately. When they were a fair distance away, Bear said, “Since we left in such a hurry, I did na get a chance to buy Artis a Christmas gift. What I want to give her is a big black dog. Of course, it will na be big when it’s a pup, but I want it to grow to be a big one. She had to leave her dog, Wilson, behind in Scotland and she still grieves for him. Mind ye, it has to be black and big.”

“Fort Harrod is a large settlement. I should be able to find one. Anything else?”

“Ye brought the presents for Little John didn’t ye?”

“Yes, they’re in the wagon.”

“Did ye get any for the lasses?”

“Yes, I brought them too.”

“Thank ye. That should be all then. Are ye sure ye do na want me to come too?”

“The trip would be more entertaining for certain, but Artis is probably worried about you and Sam could use your help with all his hands gone.”

“Aye, the lass does na like bein’ separated from me.”

“And I don’t blame her after all she’s been through.”

The two hurried back and William told Garvin, “I’ll help you load the prisoners on the mounts they stole from you men, and then we’ll be on our way.”

“As you say, Sheriff Wyllie,” Garvin said. “This time we’ll keep our weapons out of their reach!”

“Bear, Stephen, keep your pistols on Dixon and Crowell until they

are securely tied onto their horses," William ordered. "They will not be escaping again on my watch."

"If they do, they'll be dead escapees," Stephen warned, glowering at Dixon.

Chapter 24

"Uncle Sam, where do foals come from?" Polly asked as she and her sister left the barn and hiked back to the house with Sam and Little John.

"They come from inside their mother's stomach, just like we do," Sam said smiling.

"But how do they get there?" she insisted.

Sam cleared his throat.

"How did the baby get inside Aunt Catherine?" Polly asked.

"Well now…that's a good question. Your mother should answer that for you." As soon as he said it, Sam regretted it.

Polly stopped and planted her booted feet in the snow. "She's gone!" she wailed. "And I don't know if she's ever coming back."

Sam picked Polly up to carry her and drew Martha close to his side. "She will be back. And soon. I promise."

"Promise?" Polly whimpered.

"Promise!" Sam said, and gave her a kiss on the tip of her nose.

As they started walking again, the four glanced up to see a wagon and three riders approaching. Seated next to Kelly, Jane held Nicole in her lap. Stephen, Rory, and Bear all rode beside the wagon. He gazed heavenward and released a deep breath of relief.

"There they are!" Martha yelled.

Little John and Martha took off running toward the wagon and approaching horses.

"You sure keep your promises fast," Polly told him.

"Especially for you, little one," Sam said, looking into eyes that looked exactly like Stephen's.

“Put me down, please. I want to go see my mother,” Polly said.

He did and she shot toward the wagon running as fast as she could. Sam followed behind her, hurrying toward the new arrivals.

As he approached, Sam took a good look at Jane. She appeared to be unharmed, thank the Lord.

“Mother!” Martha yelled as the girl neared her mother. “We were so worried about you.” Stephen must have trained his girls well, because Martha wisely stopped running well short of the horses so she wouldn’t spook them and Polly halted beside her. But they both couldn’t help hopping and clapping excitedly.

“Martha, Polly!” Jane called to her daughters as she got off the wagon. Jane moved away from the horses and then motioned the girls to her. “Come over here!”

The next moment the girls were hugging their mother and all three were talking at once.

Looking as excited as everyone else, Riley jumped out of the wagon and ran around all of them, barking, and wagging his long tail. It didn’t take long before Little John was chasing him. Then Riley was chasing Little John, who deliberately let the dog overtake him so they could both fall down and romp in the snow.

Watching the two play, Sam decided it was time to get Little John a dog. He was old enough now to care for it properly. Perhaps he would use his limited artistic skills to draw a picture of one and give that to Little John for Christmas. He could write a note on it promising a pup in the near future. The idea made him smile.

“Where’s Samuel?” Stephen asked Sam.

“He’s with our housekeeper, Miss Henk. He’s fine,” Sam answered. “Did you have any trouble apprehending the prisoners?”

“Nay,” Bear answered. “William had already captured and tied them up. He and your hands took the scoundrels on to Fort Harrod. We’ll fill you in with all the details later. Where’s Artis?”

“She’s with Catherine,” Sam answered and then turned toward McGuffin. “Rory, welcome back.” He extended his hand to Kelly’s father and Rory shook it vigorously. “And there’s Kelly and Nicole. My word, that child has grown!”

“That’s what happens to children in a year,” Kelly said, reaching up to hug Sam’s neck. “Nicole, this is your Uncle Sam.”

“Unc Sam,” Nicole said, pointing a tiny finger at him. Her sweet face, framed by golden locks, was a soft pink color. The little girl was exceptionally pretty, like her mother.

“That’s right, Little Nic,” he said. He touched her soft cheek, realizing he would be just as happy if Catherine bore him a girl as he would if she delivered a son. He just wanted it to be all right.

He swallowed his emotions and turned toward the others. In a voice loud enough for all of them to hear, he hollered, “Why don’t you women and children go in and get warm while we men take care of the horses?”

The group of them, followed by Riley, all stomped up the porch steps, chattering and laughing. It pleased Sam to have them all here again. The noise would take some getting used to, but they were family—his family.

He turned to Stephen, Bear, and Rory. “Let’s unload William’s wagon and then you can tell me what happened while we head to the barn.”

They sat all the luggage, packages, supplies, and furs on the front porch, then led the wagon team and mounts to the barn. Rory told Sam how William shrewdly recaptured the prisoners and how smart Jane was to play along. Then he described by what means Riley provided an astute opinion of the two men.

After they all had a good laugh, Stephen told Sam how he and Bear came upon William and his family and how William finally managed to talk Stephen out of hanging the two. “William was right, of course, but those men deserve to hang,” Stephen said adamantly.

“I agree whole-heartedly. But William did the honorable thing,” Sam said.

“Aye. ‘Tis William we can count on to follow the law,” Bear agreed. “The rest of us would have hung the wretched horse’s arses.”

“He’s a principled man,” Rory said. “I’m proud to have him be my son-in-law. My Kelly girl deserves a fine man like William.”

“Bear tells me you are a physician,” Sam told Rory. Desperate for help, he peered expectantly at the man.

“I am. I forgot that for a while. Along with a lot of other important things. But I’m practicing medicine again now. I take over for Dr. McDowell every other week and, in between, help Kelly and William with chores around Whispering Hills.”

“I’m sure you’re an enormous help to them and to the townspeople of Boonesborough,” Sam said. “It’s fortunate that you’ve come. Your help may well be needed here.”

“Why?” Rory asked.

Stephen and Bear, who both already knew why, looked at each other, their faces somber.

Sam strived to remain calm as he described Catherine’s difficult pregnancy during her first marriage and how she lost the babe. He also described the discomfort that beset her lately and the most recent ache she felt this morning.

“The new pain could merely be a practice contraction,” Rory said.

“That’s what our cook, Mrs. Wrigley, said,” Sam told him.

“However, the pain in her side might be concerning,” Rory added.

“The midwife thinks it’s because the baby may be breech.”

Rory’s face remained impassive, but he turned at once toward the house. “Take me to her.”

“Will you two finish tending to the horses?” Sam asked Stephen and Bear.

They nodded and Sam left with Rory striding swiftly beside him.



When Sam and Rory came back inside, Sam was relieved to see Catherine seated in her chair with all the children and women gathered around her. Sam watched her as he and Rory removed their coats and hats and hung their weapons on the wall racks. She seemed lively and cheerful and friendly banter filled the room.

“Rory,” Catherine said, extending her hand to him as they made their way to her. “Welcome!”

Rory bent and gallantly kissed the back of her hand. “Thank you, my gracious lady. I see you have your hands full here,” he said, sweeping his hand out to indicate the large boisterous group. “It’s a good thing we built such a large home for you and Sam.”

“Indeed. And I’m still grateful for all the help you gave Sam and Bear building it,” Catherine replied.

Riley began licking Little John’s face and Catherine started laughing. The joyous sound of her laughter warmed Sam’s troubled heart.

“We’re going to have sweets and then sing carols,” Martha volunteered. Both Martha and Polly were still clinging close to their mother, who now held Samuel in her lap.

Little John sat on the floor cross-legged, latched on to Riley. “Then Artis and I will show them where all their rooms are,” Little John added.

“Kelly girl, will you please take Catherine’s place and lead this heavenly choir,” Rory said, “while I visit with Catherine and Sam?”

“Of course, Pa” Kelly agreed.

Catherine stood. “What is it Sam?”

“Follow me,” Sam said, leading the way.

Mrs. Wrigley, carrying a large tray of sweets, nearly ran into them.

Sam righted the tray in time to save the delectable assortment of tarts and then told her, “Mrs. Wrigley, this is Kelly’s father Rory McGuffin. Rory this is Mrs. Wrigley, a valuable member of our family who keeps us all well fed.”

“It is my great pleasure to make your acquaintance lovely lady,” Rory told the cook. “Let me take that tray for you.”

Mrs. Wrigley seemed tongue tied, but nodded to Rory.

“Will you and Rory please join us in a moment, Mrs. Wrigley?” Sam asked as Rory took the tray.

“Certainly, Captain Wyllie. I’ll be along shortly.”

He followed Catherine into their bedroom.

“Sam, if you’re worried about me, I’m feeling much better,” Catherine said as she entered the bedroom.

“You may remember that Rory is a physician,” Sam said.

“I had forgotten that. Bear did mention it,” Catherine replied.

Rory and Mrs. Wrigley came in quietly and stood by them.

“Have you had that new pain again?” Sam asked.

“No, I drank Mrs. Wrigley’s tea, napped for a short while, and now I feel perfectly fine,” Catherine said, smiling at them. “Why don’t we all join the others for carols?”

“Mrs. Wyllie?” Rory asked.

“Please call me Catherine,” she said. “We’re family now.”

“Catherine, would you allow me to examine you? I’ve delivered my share of babies and I may be able to help,” Rory said.

“Oh,” Catherine said, gripping her middle, “there it is again.”

“What?” Sam asked, keeping his voice level with some effort.

“That new pain.”

“Describe it, please,” Rory asked.

“It’s the strangest sensation. It’s as if a giant’s hand just grabbed my entire stomach. Like a cramp, only worse.” Catherine took a deep breath.

“Might I suggest that you lie down,” Mrs. Wrigley recommended.

“Should we go get the midwife?” Sam asked Rory.

“Let me examine her first. If I think this is her time, we’ll send for her. Midwifes can be quite helpful during a birthing.”

“I’m not so sure about this midwife!” Sam said.

“Sam!” Catherine scolded. “Besides, I think Mrs. Smith is scheduled to come today anyway.”

“Mrs. Wrigley, please help Mrs. Wyllie remove her gown. Leave her shift on,” Rory instructed.

The women followed his instructions while Sam added more logs to the hearth and he and Rory chatted quietly in front of the fire.

Catherine reclined on the bed and Mrs. Wrigley pulled the sheet over her. “I’m ready,” she told them.

Taking a seat beside her, Rory began his examination. He proceeded slowly and methodically, feeling her abdomen. “Has your baby been active recently?” he asked.

“Oh yes. The midwife asked me to drink a lot of coffee to stimulate his movement, and ever since he’s poked and prodded. I think he’s already using his fists like a Wyllie.”

Sam had to laugh, despite himself, and Rory chuckled.

“Well, that’s a good sign,” Rory said, continuing to place his palms here and there.

“Is he breech?” Sam asked when he could wait no longer. He had to know.

“Indeed,” Rory said solemnly. He gave Catherine a fatherly pat on her shoulder.

Sam swallowed, not trusting himself to speak. As he absorbed the ominous news, there was a firm knock on the door. “Come in,” Sam said.

The midwife entered the room and without greeting anyone, said, “What, pray tell, is going on here? Men should not be attending a woman when she is due to deliver. Both of you, out! Mrs. Wyllie is my charge.”

Sam willed himself to be patient. “Mrs. Smith, we are delighted that you have arrived. We were just going to send someone for you. This is Rory McGuffin, a physician.”

Rory extended his hand to her, but she ignored it. “Hmph. What do male doctors know about a woman giving birth?”

“I know a great deal, Mrs. Smith. I trained at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, the finest medical school in the country. There I studied anatomy, surgery and midwifery. I have

virtually memorized De Corporis Humani Fabrica and other well-known anatomical texts. I substantially extended my knowledge of the normal and pathological anatomy of the human body through performing countless operations and even dissection of human cadavers."

Sam smiled and nodded, impressed and Mrs. Wrigley's eyes widened.

"Outrageous! Heresy!" Mrs. Smith sputtered.

Undeterred, Rory continued. "And, at the Boonesborough Apothecary, I rely on trusted English and Scottish pharmacy books that include chemicals, plants, and other products from around the world. Along with Dr. McDowell, we provide some of the best medical and surgical care available in Kentucky or any other state for that matter."

"So you're a surgeon," she spat. "Nothing more than a glorified barber or dentist."

"Mrs. Smith! How dare you speak to a guest in my house that way," Catherine scolded. "He's a member of our family!"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wyllie, I didn't know that. But I wager my experience with so-called surgeons will prove me right."

"Mrs. Smith, kindly refrain from further disparaging remarks. Surely you can at least be civil," Sam said. He wanted to toss her out of the house, but was reluctant in case she was needed later.

"My apologies," the mid-wife told Rory, although she didn't look too sincere.

"No offense taken," Rory said. "As I was about to explain, there are several options with a breech birth. The most drastic is surgical removal of the baby."

A sudden coldness hit Sam's core. He could hear the women and children singing Christmas carols in the front room. The normally uplifting songs seemed out of place in the tension filled the room.

Mrs. Smith paled and looked as though she might actually swoon. Gasping, she took hold of the bedpost to steady herself.

Sam tried to ignore the mid-wife, but had little success. "The other options?" he asked.

“Oh, another one!” Catherine yelped.

Mrs. Wrigley took hold of Catherine’s hand and patted it.

“This is the third contraction she has had today,” Rory explained for the mid-wife’s benefit.

“Nothing more than practice contractions caused by the full moon. It’s too early for her to deliver,” the woman insisted.

“A woman’s body decides when it’s time, not us,” Rory said firmly. “It may be hours, tomorrow, or even the next day or two, but I believe this child is coming soon.”

Sam’s heartbeat raced in his chest. “What’s the second option?” he questioned, hoping it would be a better choice. Surgery would be extraordinarily risky. He’d heard of other deliveries by surgery to save the babe’s life, but the mother rarely survived. There must be another option. There had to be.

“We can try to turn the babe,” Rory said.

Catherine’s eyes widened and she laid a hand over her heart.

Rory addressed Catherine. “It’s been done. Often with success.”

“That would be unorthodox,” the midwife declared. “Nature should take its course. If you do anything else, you risk killing the babe.”

Catherine turned back to Rory. “You said *often* with success. What happens the other times?” Her voice and hands quivered a little.

“Any number of things that are not desirable,” Rory answered.

“Such as?” Sam asked.

Rory seemed reluctant to answer. “The umbilical cord could be squeezed as the babe’s head moves toward the birth canal. This would slow the supply of oxygen and blood. Worse, the babe’s cord can be squashed, cutting off his air entirely. He would suffocate.”

Catherine’s trembling hands flew to her mouth.

“What else?” Sam asked.

“It could cause premature rupture of the fetal membrane.”

“The sack the baby is in?” Catherine asked.

“Yes,” Rory said, “if it happens before the babe can be delivered, then…”

“Don’t say it,” Catherine cried, her eyes glistening.

Mrs. Wrigley went to Catherine’s dresser and retrieved a handkerchief.

As Catherine dabbed her lashes, Rory regarded her with kind eyes. “All of these bad outcomes are no more likely than turning the baby without complications,” he told her.

“Sam,” Catherine said, holding her hand out for him to grasp. “Whatever are we to do?”

The desperation in her voice rattled Sam, but he would remain strong for her. “We’ll decide this carefully,” he said as he took hold of her hand.

She turned her face away as tears started to spill from her eyes again.

Mrs. Smith crossed her arms in front of her. “I’m warning you, just let nature take its due course. If she’s meant to live, and the babe is, all will be well,” the mid-wife said. “If not, they were not meant to live. Let God’s will be done.”

“That is not God’s will!” Sam shouted. Anger blasted through him with the ferocity of an exploding canon ball. He released Catherine’s hand and pointed at the door. “Get out! Wait in the kitchen until I come for you. And don’t tell our family *any* of this.”

“Well, I never! I ought to slap you silly.”

He waited, challenging her to go through with it.

Her eyes flinty, she stuck her narrow nose in the air, lifted her gray wool skirt, and stomped out.

“I may kill that woman before this is over,” Sam swore as soon as the door slammed behind her.

“I’ve seen worse,” Rory said.

“It must have been in hell,” Mrs. Wrigley said, shaking her head.

“It was,” Rory said.

Sam knew the doctor meant during the Revolution. The war had been long and brutal for both of them and many others.

“Mrs. Wrigley and I will leave you two to discuss this. But I would advise trying to turn the babe as soon as possible. The sooner the better.”

“Rory, Little John or Artis will show you to your room. I told them where to put everyone so we should all fit,” Catherine told Rory as he and Mrs. Wrigley left the room.

Always the gracious hostess and lady, Catherine was concerned about Rory’s comfort even though she faced one of the most difficult decisions of her life.

Lord help him, so did he.

Chapter 25

Deep in thought, Sam paced the room. Catherine rested against several bed pillows, but neither one spoke for a few minutes as their hearts gripped the enormity of their decision. The three choices facing them were all horrendous.

Surgery would likely save the baby but cause Catherine's death, either from blood loss or infection.

Or Rory could try to turn the babe, which posed terrible risks for their child's life.

They could also do nothing and let nature take its course, as Mrs. Smith advocated. But that could mean *both* the babe and Catherine would die.

For Sam, the choice was difficult but clear. It was their only hope.

"What are your thoughts?" he asked, sitting down next to her.

She turned her eyes, still moist with tears, toward his. "I want to save our babe."

"And I want to save you."

She closed her eyes and started crying harder. "I don't want to leave you Sam. Our life together has just begun. But our child must come first," she sobbed.

"Surgery is too risky. Even if you didn't die of blood loss, your incisions could fester and cause a deadly infection. I've seen it too many times on the battlefield. Abdominal surgeries are often lethal. No! That is *not* an option. I can't live without you Catherine. And if you died, Little John would have no mother."

"I hadn't thought about him," she wailed. "That just makes the choice even more difficult."

“No, it doesn’t. We both need you. We have to save *you*.”

“Sam, no, no,” she cried, shaking her head. She put her hands against her stomach. “This is our son—just as surely as Little John is a real wonderful boy—this child is alive and real.”

“I understand that,” he said.

“Then you will agree, it’s our duty to save him. We have to! We must!”

“I want that just as much as you, but not at the expense of your life. I won’t choose!”

“You have to, Sam,” she wailed, covering her eyes with her hands.

“No! I refuse,” he said, clenching his jaw. “God put a man with Rory’s skills here for a reason.”

“Yes,” she agreed, looking at him again. “So that he could perform the surgery and save our son.”

“No. So that he could save both you and the babe by turning it.”

Catherine quickly shook her head. “No! You heard Rory. Our son could suffocate. I won’t risk it!”

“We just have to believe that Rory can perform that miracle—turn the babe safely—and save both of you,” he insisted, making his voice firm but composed.

“Maybe Mrs. Smith is right. Maybe we should do nothing and just see what happens.”

“By then it might be too late to save either one of you. I won’t let that happen.” He stood and ambled over to the hearth fire, gazing into the flames. If something happened to Catherine, it would turn his life to ruin just as surely as the fire laid waste to the logs in the hearth. “Doing nothing often leads to nothing. We can’t leave this to chance.”

Catherine rose and startled him by gathering up her petticoats and gown. Her movements were awkward and slow, but he could see her emotions rising hot and fast.

“What are you doing?” he asked, incredulous.

“I’m getting dressed. And then I’m going to join my family in our Christmas celebrations. I should be out there now. We’ll all enjoy Christmas together until the babe comes, then I will have the surgery.” Her chin was quivering, but her voice was resolute.

A cold tightness settled in Sam’s chest. If he couldn’t talk her out of this surgery, it might be their last Christmas together. He banished the thought as quick as it came. He couldn’t let that happen.

“Catherine, please, come and sit in front of the fire with me. We have to decide this together—you and me.”

“No, I’ve made my decision. It’s my life and my body and *I* will determine what happens to it—not you!”

She flung the words at him like a knife and they stabbed his heart just as painfully and deeply as the sharpest blade.

“But it’s *our* child.”

The truth of his words stopped her. She froze in place. Then she turned and ran to him, letting his arms enfold her. She wept against his chest and cried, “I’m sorry Sam, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry. You just have to believe. Believe in that miracle you talked about.” He hugged her and kissed the top of her head, resting just below his chin.

She tilted her head back to look into his face. “Do you in fact believe, truly believe, that God will perform this miracle?”

He wiped the tears from her cheeks with his knuckle and said, “I do.”

“Then I will too.”



“Mrs. Smith?” Sam called into the kitchen.

“Yes,” she answered from a corner chair, where she sat by herself.

He stood in front of her, but she remained seated.

“Your services are no longer required. Here’s your normal fee,” he said, handing her the coins.

“What do you mean by that?” she demanded as she grabbed for the coins.

The touch of her cold bony fingers made a shiver scuttle down Sam’s spine, nevertheless he looked her in the eye and said, “Since we have a well-qualified physician and Mrs. Wrigley, who has had many children herself, here to assist him, your help is no longer needed.”

Affronted and evidently surprised, her eyes widened. “You don’t mean to say you’re going to listen to that…that… charlatan!”

“I am indeed,” Sam answered.

She shook a finger in his face. “May an old woman’s curse rest upon you for heeding that barbaric man,” she swore pointing a finger at him. “Please bid Mrs. Wyllie goodbye for me.”

“That I will do, to be sure,” Sam said. “I’ll have one of my brothers escort you to your hamlet.”

“I’ll not have it! It would be improper for me to be alone with a man. I am well used to traversing these woods by myself!”

“As you wish,” he hurriedly agreed. “Mrs. Wrigley, please escort Mrs. Smith to the door.”

“With pleasure,” Mrs. Wrigley said with a roll of her eyes and a side-long glance at him.

Mrs. Smith hurried toward the door, threw on her heavy coat, and left.

Through the front window, Sam watched her wagon leave, breathing a sigh of relief. He turned around and glanced about the room for Rory. Bear and Artis sat comfortably in front of the fire conversing with Stephen and Jane. The four glanced at him, but he simply said, “I’ll explain later.”

“Is Catherine well?” Artis asked.

“She will be!” Sam swore as he strode toward Rory, who had Nicole balanced on one knee and Samuel on the other.

Imitating Rory, the two toddlers were making funny faces at each other and at Kelly. Sam could hear the other children playing upstairs.

“I hate to interrupt your game, but we’ve made a decision,” Sam

told Rory.

"Kelly girl, take these two little jesters," he said.

Rory followed him into the bedroom and Sam closed the door.

"We want you to try to turn the babe," he told Rory without preamble.

"Good. You've have made the best decision under the circumstances," he said. He turned to Catherine, his chin set with determination. "I promise you, I will do everything in my power to save your child. You have just given your babe the best chance at life."

"What do we do now?" she asked.

Sam still saw vulnerability in her eyes, but now strength showed on her face.

"We'll do several things. First, Mrs. Wrigley was correct to give you Mugwort tea, but what we'll do is use a warm compress of mugwort on your abdomen to stimulate blood flow. This can cause uterine contractions that may change the babe's position."

"Let's get started," Sam said. "I'll have Mrs. Wrigley gather what you need and I'll bring it."

"Tell her to prepare a warm compress with plenty of mugwort. If she doesn't have enough, I brought some with me. Also, have her send some mixed with lavender, if she has it, in a pan we can burn over the hearth fire. We'll burn that and let Catherine breathe the smoke."

"Understood," Sam said, glad to be finally able help and take action. "Anything else?"

"Yes, have Miss Henk bring a stack of extra pillows, a blanket, and sheets for the floor."

That made Sam curious, but he would save his questions for later. He set off to find Mrs. Wrigley and Miss Henk as fast as he could.



"Rory, I'm so grateful you're here to help me," Catherine said after Sam left. Dressed in her warm blue velvet robe, she sat in front

of the hearth.

“I’m glad I’m here too,” Rory said. He walked over and stood in front of her.

“Who would have guessed that a man with your building and trapping skills would also be a well-trained physician?”

“We can all have many talents as long as we are open to learning new things,” he said. “A lifetime is long enough to learn a dozen skills if we’re willing to try new things. My old friend Benjamin Franklin was an author, printer, statesman, postmaster, scientist, inventor, and earned two honorary doctoral degrees. Compared to him, I’m an underachiever.”

She laughed. “Well, I guess I had better get busy learning some new skills. How did you know Dr. Franklin?”

“We used to frequent the same tavern when I went to medical school in Pennsylvania. We had some lively conversations there!”

Catherine leaned forward. “Rory, Sam’s not here just now. Tell me honestly. Do you think turning the babe will work? Please tell me the candid truth.”

“Yes, it could very well work. But the most important thing is for you to believe it will work. You will need to focus on your babe and stay as relaxed as possible, without tensing your body, especially in the abdominal area while we try several techniques.”

“All right.”

“Have you had any other cramps or contractions?”

“No, only the three.”

“Then I think we can safely assume, they were not true labor contractions. That’s good, we need some time to get your babe to turn.”

“Do you think it’s a boy?” she asked.

“There’s a good chance. If not, it’s a really big girl,” he said chuckling. “However, one never knows for sure until we catch our first delightful glimpse.”

“I can’t wait for that,” she said.

“I think we would all like that,” he agreed. “As soon as Miss Henk gets here with the pillows and blankets, I will have you lie on the floor and then we will elevate your hips about a foot. We will have you do this for about fifteen minutes, twice this evening and three times tomorrow.”

Catherine teared. For the first time today, she felt hope fill her heart. Rory certainly seemed to know what to do. Sam was right. The doctor was sent here for a reason.

Miss Henk hurried in carrying several pillows, sheets, and a couple of thick blankets.

“Thank you Miss Henk,” Rory said, moving Catherine’s two favorite upholstered chairs, which sat in front of the hearth, well to the side. “Help me make a pallet on that rug in front of the hearth for Mrs. Wyllie. After you get the blankets laid out, stack pillows at least a foot high.”

“Yes, Sir,” the housekeeper replied, getting started.

As he helped unfold and place the blankets, he said, “Catherine, get completely undressed, except for your shift, Lay with your hips on top of the pillow stack and expose the skin of your abdomen to the heat of the hearth. We will put the warm compress there shortly. Miss Henk can help lower you onto the pillows and then cover you once you are in a comfortable in position.”

Catherine didn’t think it would be possible to get comfortable with her bottom a foot up in the air, but she sighed and said, “All right.”

“Cover all of you with a sheet except your abdomen. I want you to stay warm. I’ll step out while Miss Henk gets you prepared.” He squeezed her hand and left.

After Rory left the room, Catherine felt a moment of panic. She quickly prayed that Sam was right about this being their best option—that, with God’s help, Rory could save their babe. And her from certain death.

Chapter 26

It didn't work. At least not yesterday or the two times they tried earlier today. But Sam refused to give up. They would try tilting her hips and the compress one more time.

Sam paced in the front room, sipping a small brandy for his frazzled nerves as he waited impatiently for Mrs. Wrigley to make the final compress.

Had he made a mistake? He asked himself the same question a dozen times during the night and another dozen times so far today. Each time, he came to the same conclusion. It was their best and only option.

But in the dark wee hours of the morning, when he wasn't thinking straight, he'd let himself wonder if the old woman's curse might come true.

He sat the brandy on the mantel and ran his hands through his hair, eyes squeezed shut. *God, please, grant us that miracle*.

Since it was a mild sunny day, Bear and Stephen were outside, waiting for William to arrive. They were both as anxious as he was to see their brother return safely. Everyone else was upstairs resting or reading, trying to stay quiet for Catherine's sake so she could relax.

"It's ready," the cook called to Sam.

He went to her and took the warm compress.

"That's the end of the mugwort," she told him.

"Dr. McGuffin has more if we need it," he answered.

"I pray it works this time, Captain," she said kindly.

"Me too," Sam replied. "Please continue to pray."

He took the compress into the bedroom and carefully handed it to the doctor.

Rory positioned it on Catherine's abdomen and then reached for the pan with the mugwort and lavender in it and placed it near the hot coals in the hearth. "I've been holding off on burning this because it has a rather strong odor—like incense—that tends to linger. Hopefully, mixed with lavender, it won't be too overpowering. The lavender should be relaxing and may even make you sleepy. We will give the compress and the smoke fifteen minutes or so and then if it doesn't work, we'll try another trick," he said cheerfully.

"What?" Catherine probed.

Rory smiled down at her. "Right now, I want you to focus on your baby. Visualize his head where it is intended to be. Speak to him, Catherine. Let your heart reach out to his."

"All right, Doctor," Catherine said, taking a deep breath.

"Sam and I will leave you with your babe. Rest and relax. Try to nap if you can." Rory nodded his head toward the door, indicating Sam should follow him.

"Call if you need us," Sam told her.

They returned to the still deserted front room. Everyone realized the danger Catherine was in and the mood in the house was subdued. Earlier, while she was resting in her bedroom, Sam and Rory carefully explained to the entire family, even the children, what they were doing and why. The explanations went well until Polly remembered she still didn't have an answer to where the baby came from in the first place. With a smile on the faces of all the adults, Jane said she would explain that to both Polly and Martha later.

Thankfully, Little John didn't ask to be included.

But gratitude filled Sam when Rory made sure Little John understood that as a doctor, he had a 'lot of tricks up his sleeve' and that he felt certain his mother would be all right.

Sam prayed Rory was right. God help them all if he wasn't.

"What's your next 'trick'," he asked. He picked up his unfinished brandy. He would have offered the doctor one, but Rory didn't drink strong beverages.

"I can try repositioning the babe with my hands."

"How hard is that?"

“I won’t lie to you. It’s not easy with a babe of your child’s size. Fortunately, Catherine’s hips are not narrow. That increases our chances of success. The babe has likely settled there because it is comforting to be nestled next to her beating heart. We just have to encourage him to move.”

Sam wondered if he was just saying that to give him a small measure of hope. He took it, however, meager it was.

Sam’s head jerked as he heard Catherine loudly cry out his name. He ran to their bedroom and threw the door open. When he entered, a sweet herbal scent hit him like a wall. The pungent fragrance made the room smell both pleasant and unpleasant.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, rushing to her side.

Rory followed on his heels.

“I think the babe is trying to turn,” Catherine said. “It’s quite… uncomfortable.”

At once, Rory knelt beside Catherine’s right side. The physician’s experienced hands roamed over her bare middle. The rest of her body was covered in sheets and blankets.

Sam took a position on her other side and held her hand. Making an effort to control his emotions, he gawked at the sight before him. He could see the babe causing bumps to appear and disappear on Catherine’s abdomen. The babe appeared to be fighting a battle inside of her.

Perhaps he was. A battle for his life. And his mother’s.

“Catherine, don’t be alarmed,” Rory said calmly. “You’re right. The babe is trying to move, that’s exactly what we want.”

She winced and clenched her jaw at another pain.

Sam squeezed her hand and stroked her hair away from her face. Her distress ripped at his heart. Was she going to be all right? He glanced up at Rory, but the doctor’s face remained inscrutable. His entire life, Sam had prided himself on being able to read people, but this time he was at a loss. “Tell me,” he nearly begged, “what I can do.”

Rory looked at him, his face serious. “We will have to help your babe turn, before he tangles himself around the cord. Can you assist

me?"

"Of course, just tell me what to do and when," Sam said, trying to keep his voice as calm as possible for Catherine's sake.

"Catherine, listen to me carefully," Rory said. "There's not enough room for your babe to turn himself. He's trying hard—that's why it hurts. We are going to have to help him."

"Yes, help him," she cried, gritting her teeth at another ache.

"Can we give her something to bite down on?" Sam asked.

"No, I need for her to be able to talk to me," Rory said.

"All will be well Catherine, I *promise*," Sam said.

Above Catherine's moans, Sam heard Polly's small but firm voice say, "He keeps his promises!"

He glanced up. The entire family stood just inside the bedroom door, Polly and Little John in front. They'd probably heard Catherine cry out. From her position, Catherine couldn't see any of them.

He started to tell them all to leave, but then realized if he did, Little John would likely fret even more. A worried person's imagination can be worse than first-hand knowledge. Besides, they might be able to help. "Pray," he mouthed to them and pointed heavenward.

"Let's get started," Rory said. "Catherine, I know it's difficult, but do your best to relax. Close your eyes and think of someplace you love to go. Someplace you were especially happy. We'll be doing a deep abdominal massage. It may make take a few minutes or it may happen quickly."

"Cumberland Falls," she whispered, "where Sam and I honeymooned." The beginning of a smile tipped the corners of her mouth. "It was stunningly beautiful."

Sam wasn't surprised at her choice. The time he spent with his new bride at Cumberland Falls was the best two weeks of his entire life. He recalled the ecstasy of loving each other thoroughly and passionately. He took his wife's hand. "I love you Catherine. Even more now than I did then. Keep thinking about the Moonbow we saw there and the miracle of our love."

“I will, and I love you, Sam. Now, help the doctor get this stubborn Wyllie to do…what…he…should,” she managed to say as she grimaced.

“Sam, I’m going to push on her abdomen to lift the baby’s body with my hands. I want you to place one of your big palms on the baby’s head here. Not your fingers, just your palm. We are going to encourage a somersault in this direction,” he said pointing clockwise.

“Ready?” Rory asked looking at them both.

Sam looked up and nodded, then glanced at his family. Stephen, Jane, Artis, Bear, Kelly, and William—*he was home, thank God*—all stood with their heads bowed. The children stared wide-eyed. Mrs. Wrigley and Miss Henk, each holding a toddler, looked on with concern on their faces.

“Let’s save this baby,” Sam said with all the confidence born from the support of family and faith.

Rory placed both of his hands on Catherine’s lower abdomen and started manipulating the babe, gently moving what had to be the babe’s feet and legs upwards, in the direction of Catherine’s right side.

“Slowly and softly begin urging the baby’s head toward you,” Rory instructed Sam. “When he starts to move toward Catherine’s left side, help him. Coax him downwards using little gentle nudges and rolls.” Rory continued to work as he spoke, his normally mellow voice edged with cool control.

Sam could not believe he held his son’s head, cloaked in his mother’s flesh, beneath his hand. He drew on the deepest part of his soul and reached out to his son, wanting to give him a strong will to live. “Wait till you see your first horse. It will be worth all this,” Sam said, his eyes watering. “And wait till you meet your big brother, Little John. You’re going to love him.”

For a second, Sam eyed Little John, who stood bravely near the door.

Little John stepped forward. “And wait till you meet our mother,” the boy said, walking over to them. “You’ll love her as much as I do.”

His son wanted to help his mother. Perhaps it would make Little John feel better about everything that was happening.

“Keep talking to her and the babe,” Rory urged Little John.

“I think you’re the most beautiful mother in the whole world,” Little John said, kneeling and placing his small hand on her shoulder. “And the kindest too.”

This time Catherine heard, he could see it in her eyes, but she was too uncomfortable to speak.

“You’ll like it here brother. Mrs. Wrigley is a very good cook,” Little John added.

The girls giggled and Bear chuckled a little.

Sam continued to concentrate on his role—perhaps the most important and challenging of his entire life.

“Press downward now!” Rory urged him.

“Turn baby. *Please* turn,” Sam cried, his heart pounding furiously.

And the babe did.

Sam saw it happen right beneath his hands. Right before his eyes. If he hadn’t seen it, he wouldn’t have believed it possible. His heart flooded with hope, but would all be well? He peered up at the doctor.

Rory was smiling.

Thank God! Sam pressed a clenched fist to his lips, trying to hold in the overwhelming emotions burgeoning and whirling with him.

“The babe is now where he belongs,” Rory said. “And thank you, Little John, for helping.”

“Thank you,” Sam told Rory, feeling tears of joy and relief slip down his face, despite his efforts to control them.

The three of them gazed down at Catherine who appeared as white as the sheet covering her. She was breathing rapidly, but no longer seemed to be in pain.

“Take deep breaths, Catherine,” Rory said, “you’re going to be fine.”

“My babe?” she asked, her voice full of hope. “Will he be all right?”

Covering Catherine's middle entirely with the sheet, Rory said. "That went as smoothly as I have ever seen it happen. Your husband was a great help. I believe you and the babe will both be fine. You should deliver a healthy baby soon."

Sam kissed and hugged Catherine and then sprung up, filled with so much joy he wanted to shout. So he did. "We did it!" he yelled.

The rest of their family cheered too and Sam didn't even mind when they all invaded the privacy of their bedroom to congratulate them.

Breathless and feeling exuberant, he picked up Little John and twirled him around. "Did you hear that? You should have a baby brother or sister soon."

"That will be the best Christmas gift for both of us," Little John said, grinning.

"Yes, the greatest gift ever! Thank you for helping, Little John," he said.

"She's my mother," Little John said. "I didn't want her to die."

Sam leaned his forehead into his son's brow and said, "She will always be your mother."

He sat the boy down and Little John went back over to Catherine, who was now surrounded by kneeling women and girls. He watched Little John nudge his way in and kiss his mother on the cheek. Sam was sure her cheeks would be wet with tears of happiness.

Sam's heart raced within his chest, infused with the joy of having witnessed something so inspirational he would remember every second of it for the rest of his life.

He still couldn't believe they had done it. His prayer had been answered. "Did you see that?" he asked his smiling brothers.

"Aye," Bear said. "'Twas the most miraculous thing I've ever seen."

Chapter 27

Rory shooed everyone out of the room, but Sam refused to leave until he gave Catherine one more kiss.

“I love you,” he whispered, kissing her. Her cheeks were still wet with big tears of joy. He wiped them, feeling her love in each drop.

“Thank you,” she told him, “thank you for believing in miracles.”

“I should. You married me didn’t you?”

Catherine smiled warmly and then he helped her to stand. She appeared tired, but her big smile and hair in a tousled disarray made her look wildly happy.

“Miss Henk will help me get tidied up and dressed,” she told him.

“No, you’re getting into bed where you’ll stay until tomorrow morning,” Rory instructed firmly.

She groaned, but nevertheless nodded her assent.

“I’ll bring a tray in with your dinner,” Miss Henk volunteered.

“Go on Sam,” Rory told him. “I just want to feel the babe’s position one more time.”

Reluctantly Sam left and joined the others in the front room. Everyone was talking and laughing, but they all stopped when he entered, turning their heads in his direction.

“Hip hip hooray!” William shouted.

“Hip hip hooray!” everyone repeated.

“Hurrah!” Bear shouted.

“Hurrah!” they all echoed.

“You did it!” Stephen called.

Sam threw up his hands. “Please, wait. I’m as happy as all of you. Nonetheless let’s save the big celebration until after the baby comes. We still have that to go through.” He dreaded it and didn’t want to celebrate too hard until Catherine’s labor was over with and both she and the babe were fine.

“Nonsense,” Jane exclaimed, hands on hips. “What just happened was a miracle and we all know it. Catherine and the babe will be fine. Enjoy this moment. You earned it.”

A big grin spread across his face. He couldn’t help it. Jubilation still filled him too. He struggled to hold his tears of joy in his eyes.

Sam stared down at his right hand, the palm that he used to help his babe find his way. His hand started to shake a little, as he recalled the feel of his son’s head. He lost himself momentarily in his own reveries. At least he thought it was a son. It might be a daughter. Either way, the child would be special. And loved. He already felt a profound and deep bond that nothing could ever destroy.

“Ye look like ye could use a wee droppy,” Bear said.

“Nay, he needs more than a wee one after what he’s just been through,” Artis said.

Bear and Artis pulled pewter cups out of the china cabinet and Mrs. Wrigley, leading Nicole by one hand and Samuel by her other, lured the five children into the kitchen with the promise of hot cocoa. “Captain Wyllie, please tell Dr. McGuffin he’s invited to join us in the kitchen when he’s through,” the cook said as she left. If he wasn’t mistaken, she had tidied herself up a bit since he saw her last.

Sam suddenly realized he had yet to speak to William. “William!” he called, turning toward his brother. “You’re back! I noticed while we were in the bedroom, but I couldn’t say anything to you then.”

William stood next to Kelly, his arm around her waist. “Understandable,” William said, smiling, “considering you were busy performing a rather impressive miracle.”

“It was a miracle, wasn’t it,” he agreed. “But I just did what Rory told me to. He and God deserve the credit.”

“Indeed, a great deal of credit,” William agreed, “but so do you.”

“Did all go well with the prisoners this time? Are they safely ensconced in Fort Harrod’s jail?”

“Absolutely. I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow. For now, we have more pressing matters to discuss.”

“Pressing?”

“Ye’ll see,” Bear said, as though he were part of some conspiracy. “After ye have your drink.”

Sam accepted the cup from Bear. “I’ll see?”

“Aye,” Bear said with a wink. “Ask na more questions, Sam.”

“Drink yer brandy up,” Stephen said.

“To miracles,” William toasted.

“To miracles!” Sam said, believing it the best toast of his life.

Bear and William downed their brandy and then smiled at each other, looking pleased with themselves.

Sam’s brows drew together as he wondered what the two were up to. He brought the cup to his lips and gulped his drink down. The warmth of it strengthened him immediately. “Now?” he asked.

“Will you ladies kindly excuse us?” William asked, interrupting the animated conversation Kelly, Jane, and Artis were having.

The ladies all nodded and took seats near the fire while the men donned their coats and hats and went outside.

“Where are we going?” Sam asked.

“You’ll see big brother,” William said, “just follow me.”

William led him, along with Bear and Stephen, into the barn. They proceeded through it to the attached quarters for Sam’s men. He thought the large room would be dark and cold since the men were on holiday, but it wasn’t. A nice fire crackled in the hearth. As they entered, he heard the strangest sound. A shrill yap. Then another. Two yaps at the same time. “Puppies?” he chuckled.

“Indeed. I got them at the fort,” William said, flashing his brilliant smile. “Both males.”

Sam bent and picked the wriggling one up. He’d always enjoyed the smell unique to puppies. It was right up there with the smell of horses and Mrs. Wrigley’s fresh baked bread. He took a deep whiff and

then turned to William. “Why did you get these? You already have Riley.”

The other one stood there wagging its tail energetically. “One is for Artis,” Bear said, picking up the one with a large white spot on his chest and on the tips of his front paws. “’Tis her Christmas present. She had to leave her big black dog Wilson behind in Scotland. It broke her heart.”

“This pup should help heal her heart then. Look at the size of those paws and the length of those legs,” Stephen said, taking hold of one of the pup’s paws. “He’s going to be big, perhaps a hundred pounds or more. Oh dear.”

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“Now Martha and Polly will want to have one,” Stephen said, frowning. “One more mouth to feed.” Stephen was ever the pragmatist.

Sam laughed along with William and Bear.

“The other one is for Little John,” William said, “with your permission, of course.”

“That’s excellent,” Sam said. “I just decided yesterday, or was it the day before? Time is all blurred now. Anyway, I just decided to get him a puppy, when I saw him playing with Riley, when you arrived. For Christmas morning, I was going to draw a picture of a dog and write a promise to get him one next time we went to a settlement.”

“Well, he’s yours to give Little John if you want him. They were litter mates and looked like they’d make fine dogs,” William said. “Getting them here was the only challenge. I found a bag big enough to hold them, put a blanket in the bottom, and cut two holes in the top.”

“You should give the pup to Little John,” Sam said.

“No, I bought him another present,” William said. “He’s yours.”

“Thank you,” Sam said. “How much do I owe you?”

“Not a thing. I’ll get it back in the abundant amounts of food and wine I plan to consume while I’m here.”

“I’ll still owe you plenty brother. You’ll make me look like a

hero," Sam said.

"You *are* a hero," Stephen pointed out. "In more ways than one. If my memory serves, you even have a medal given to you by President Washington himself."

"Speaking of Washington, I have some sad news to report," William said. "A mail carrier from Virginia arrived at the fort while I was there. He brought dreadful news that's spreading like wildfire."

"What is it?" Sam asked, concerned.

"President Washington has died."

Sam gasped and his mouth fell open. The country had lost its finest hero.

"How?" Bear asked.

"The rider gave us a few details, but I have no idea how accurate they are. He said Washington caught a chill and fell ill. Evidently, he spent a long day on horseback in the frigid rain and snow supervising operations on his estate. Late for dinner and known for his punctuality, Washington insisted on remaining in his damp clothes. The next day, he grew gravely ill."

Sam squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. "When did he die?

"The fourteenth of December, nine days ago," William answered.

A heavy feeling in his chest, Sam sat the puppy back on the floor. "He wasn't that old. Mid-sixties, if I remember his age correctly."

"A tremendous loss for our country," Stephen said.

"It is a great loss," Sam agreed, "because he was truly a great man. I've never served or fought with better. When he summoned us —all of us battle-weary and exhausted to a man—we could only respond to his voice with veneration and love. Many times, we were starving, frozen, and poorly clothed, and it was simply the sight of him that kept us all going."

"'Tis clear he meant a lot to ye," Bear said.

"Yes, he did indeed." Picking up the pup again, Sam swallowed his emotions. There would be time to grieve the death of Washington

later. For now, he wanted to enjoy life with those he loved. “Which one is Artis’ pup, Bear?”

“I’ll keep this one for Artis,” Bear said, petting the pup with the white spot. “I think I’ve already grown attached to him.”

“Good heavens. It’s only been five minutes,” Stephen pointed out.

“Aye, and ‘twas long enough for me to know he’d be perfect for Artis.” Bear clutched the tiny pup protectively against his big broad chest.

“The four of us can take turns watering and feeding them scraps,” William suggested.

“We can check on them and let them out every time we go to the privy. That way the children and women won’t get suspicious,” Sam added.

“Aye, if we all do that, the pups will na get lonely before Christmas mornin’,” Bear said.

“All right,” Sam agreed. “But Stephen, you’re in charge of house training them.”

“Me?” Stephen whined. “Why me?”

“Because you’re the youngest,” William said, laying one of his long arms across Sam’s shoulders. “And we’re bigger.”

William and Sam both grinned at Stephen, daring him to object.

When Stephen started to protest, Sam quickly said, “The real reason is that you’re the best trainer of the four of us. You can train the pups faster than any of us. Have them trained to do their business outside before Christmas.”

“I train horses, not puppies!” Stephen objected. He jumped to grab a puppy about to squat, held him out at arm’s length, and then hurried toward the door.

Laughing, William and Bear shadowed Stephen and Sam followed, smiling and carrying Little John’s pup.

“House trained by Christmas morning,” Sam ordered, using his Captain voice on Stephen. “Gooood boy,” he soothed as he sat the pup down.

“But Christmas is in two days,” Stephen moaned.

“Aye, see if ye can have them well trained before then,” Bear said. “I do na want a pup leakin’ his wee willie onto my bed.”

Chapter 28

Sam poked his head in to check on Catherine as soon as he came back inside. She appeared to be sleeping comfortably so he quietly closed the door and turned toward the front room.

As he made his way down the candle lit hall, he grinned. He could hear Mrs. Wrigley and Rory having a lively conversation in the kitchen about home remedies. He raised his brows. He thought he sensed an immediate attraction between the two. If this kept up, either he would lose a good cook or William would have to hire a new helper for Whispering Hills.

"Tomorrow is Christmas Eve," Jane told the three children gathered around her skirts as Sam strode into the front room. Samuel and Nicole had already been put to bed. "Do you know what that means?"

"It's the day before Christmas," Martha said, "of course."

Sam remembered from his own childhood that Christmas is a magical time for children. But he wondered if, at age ten, Martha, was beginning to lose sight of some of the magic. He hoped she would have at least one more year to be enchanted by the season.

Behind the children, Bear sat leaning against the wall on a sturdy cushioned bench, with Artis in his lap. Above the newlyweds, a large sprig of mistletoe hung from the ceiling, which the couple were putting to good use. The newlyweds looked tighter than bark on a tree and it wouldn't surprise Sam if Bear didn't find some excuse for the two to leave the room shortly.

"Are you going to tell the children a story?" Sam asked Jane, pouring himself a glass of punch and grabbing a piece of fruit cake before taking his chair. He hoped Jane would. Like many with Scots blood in her veins, she was an excellent storyteller.

Jane held up her copy of *'The Christmas Frolic; or, Mirth for the Holidays,'* and said, "I'll be reading a story from this collection."

“What’s the story about?” Polly asked.

“A ghost,” Jane replied, eyes wide.

“Oh, excellent,” Little John said. “Please tell it, Aunt Jane.”

“Indeed, I will, but not until you three promise to go to bed without complaining and better yet, go to sleep, as soon as the tale is finished,” she said. “It’s growing late, and you all need your sleep to grow properly.”

The three nodded their heads.

“This is a story about the Twelfth Night, the last of the Twelve Days of Christmas, and the highlight of the Yuletide holidays. Throughout the colonies, as they do in England, people dance, drink, and eat huge meals to celebrate. Sometimes they eat so much, they start to see things they normally can’t or do things they normally wouldn’t do. Are you ready?” she asked.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Polly said, “hurry.”

So Jane began. “This is the story called, ’The Haunted House; a Twelfth-day Tale’.*”* Jane paused to smile at the children.

> *“On Twelfth Night, in the Year 1771, a large Company was assembled at the Seat of Edmund Williams, Esq. in Berkshire, to partake of the usual Diversions of the Evening. When Supper was over, and the Twelfth-Cake had been shared, with the customary Scene of Frolic, the Company began to think of departing; but as the Weather proved unfavorable, and most of the Company had a considerable way home, Mr. Williams accommodated as many of them as possible with Beds; but there was still one young Gentleman (Captain Darnley) unprovided for and Mr. Williams frankly told him he had no room in which to lodge him, but one that was supposed to be haunted; and though (continued he) I have no Idea of such nonsense myself, we never yet could get any person to lodge in that Room. Young Darnley said he should be proud of lodging in such a Room; and Preparations were immediately made for his reception; a good Fire being Lighted, and a Candle placed on a Table near it. The Captain retired to rest, and after reflecting an Hour on the oddity of his situation, fell a Sleep. About three o’clock he was awakened by the opening of the Chamber Door, and not a little surprised to see a genteel Figure in White Walk slowly towards the Bed. The Candle burnt dim, and the Captain, with all his*

Courage, was too much alarmed to judge what the Apparition was. At length it turned down the bed cloths, and came softly into Bed. The Captain found that it breathed, and was then less terrified. At length he extended his Arm towards it, and felt a Finger, from which he slipped a Ring. Soon afterwards the Ghost left the Bed, stalked slowly across the Room, and shut the Door after it. The Captain slept in tranquility during the remainder of the Night, and in the Morning, when the Company were assembled at Breakfast, he asked if any Person had lost a Ring."

"Had they?" Polly asked.

Jane looked down, and continued reading.

"Miss Williams declared herself Mistress of it."

"What does mistress of it mean?" Martha asked.

"It means that she owned it. It was her ring," Jane explained.

"Then what happened?" Little John asked. "Was she a ghost at nighttime?"

"Darnley related the particulars of the visit of the ghost, not a little to the confusion of the young Lady.

"Mr. Williams took up the matter in a fresh point of view, and said that as his Daughter had gone to Bed to the Captain without her Knowledge, it should be his Fault if he did not go to Bed to her in return."

"What does that mean?" Martha asked.

"It means a young lady should never be in a man's bedroom especially at night and in his bed unless they are married," Stephen said firmly. "Since she was, and he did not prevent her, he was forced to marry her."

Jane smiled at her husband, ever the protective father, and continued.

"The Captain most joyfully accepted the Terms; a happy Marriage soon ensued, and he has called his Lady by the Name of his Dear Ghost ever since."

"That wasn't terribly scary," Little John complained. "She was just sleepwalking."

“But it was romantic,” Martha said.

Stephen frowned at her.

“Aunt Artis, do you know any truly scary stories, ones like you told before about Scotland?” Little John asked. “Scarier than that one? And longer?”

Evidently, Little John’s standards for ghost stories were quite high, Sam thought.

“Oh, aye,” Artis responded, sitting up straighter in Bear’s lap. “’Tis said Scotland is the most haunted place on the earth. So, we have more than our share of both ghosts and ghost stories.”

“Nay,” Bear said, “she’s much too tired tonight to tell a story. Artis will save her story for Christmas Eve. I think we should all retire early. ‘Twas a long day for all of us and we need to be quiet so Catherine can sleep.” Bear’s big hand moved up and down Artis’ back.

Little John looked disappointed but was soon engaged in a debate with Martha about why ghost stories were much more entertaining than romantic stories. Polly seemed to be moderating.

Kelly, sitting next to William, had evidently been watching Bear and Artis too because she giggled.

Sam knew exactly what Kelly was thinking. He was thinking the same thing. He took a swallow of the wine and suddenly got an inspiration.

“Catherine is deep asleep. I just checked,” Sam said. “I don’t think we need to worry about keeping her awake. Bear, the night’s young and we don’t have a chance to visit that often. If Artis is tired, she can go on to bed. Why don’t you and I play a card game against Stephen and William? A nice long card game into the wee hours is just what I need to take my mind off everything.”

Kelly caught on quickly. “I agree, Sam. We will have precious few evenings for all of us to visit together. Why spend them sleeping?”

Bear’s brows drew together in a definite frown.

Sam had to cover his mouth with his hand to hide his smile.

William caught on and joined in, amusement flickering in his twinkling blue eyes. “A long card game is an excellent idea, Sam. The

newlyweds will have plenty of time to sleep when they're back at Highland."

"I love that name for your new home by the way, Bear," Sam said. "I want you to tell me *all* about it."

Bear took a deep breath, and let it out.

Sam continued. "How'd you build it? How many rooms? Did you build it with logs or brick? How long did it take?"

Bear rolled his eyes and then frowned.

"Too many questions at once?" Sam asked. "Don't worry, we have all night."

Artis smiled at Bear and said, "I am rather tired husband. While you answer Sam's questions, I'm goin' to bed. Good night all." She stood, gave Bear a quick kiss, and with of swoosh of her skirt, she turned to leave.

"Perhaps I should come too," Bear said, quickly standing up, "ye know how ye get nightmares when ye sleep in strange places."

Surprisingly, Artis didn't pick up on Bear's underlying intent or if she did, she was ignoring it. She turned around. "Bear, yer room here is the first strange place I've slept in since we've been married," she said, "and I slept quite well last night. And I intend to again this night!"

As Artis left, Bear closed his eyes and slowly shook his head, giving up. His romantic intentions would have to wait for another night. He groaned a bit and then sat back down, arms crossed in front of his chest.

Jane stood to leave too. "Come children. Time to quit arguing and go to bed."

Stephen stood up to go help his wife get the children to bed, as he usually did. "Come now, sweet dreams await you." He reached out for Polly's hand.

They all whined a bit, forgetting their promise to Jane, but they got up and trudged off toward their rooms followed by Jane and Stephen. "I'll tuck Little John in for you Sam," Stephen called back.

"I'll be there in just a minute, Little John," Sam said.

Kelly stood in front of Bear. “You’re looking a bit peaked, Bear,” she said, “don’t you think so Sam?”

“Yes, his color is a little sickly,” Sam answered. “I noticed that earlier.”

“His face does appear wan and drawn,” William agreed. “It could be he’s just overly tired.”

“Perhaps you should go to bed now after all, Bear,” Sam said, sympathetically. “I won’t have you getting sick just before Christmas. Kelly, you can be my partner in our card game.”

Kelly couldn’t seem to help herself and started giggling. She tried to hold up a hand to stifle her giggles, but in spite of herself, she started laughing. William soon joined her, laughing so hard he had to hold his stomach.

When Sam could no longer hold it back, he laughed triumphantly. He was reminded of the days when they would play practical jokes on one another. This might be one of his best.

Bear stood, finally catching on to their game, his eyes lit with annoyance. He glared at the three of them, but only for a moment or two. Then, he threw back his head and his deep laugh rumbled through the air.

Sam slapped Bear on the back. “Go join your lovely bride,” he said, still chuckling. “And lock your door!”

“Aye, to be sure,” Bear murmured, half laughing, half crying himself.

Chapter 29

The next morning, Catherine dressed quietly to let Sam sleep. She could always come back later to polish up her hair and face and don her jewelry before their Christmas Eve celebrations. She had no idea what time he came to bed, but knowing his brothers, they probably kept him up half the night.

She found Mrs. Wrigley hard at work in the kitchen with Miss Henk and Rory both helping her. What was he doing in the kitchen?

“Good morning everyone!” she said entering. “Can a woman get a cup of hot coffee in here?”

“Catherine!” Rory said. “How do you feel?”

“Never better,” she answered truthfully.

“Any pains at all?” he asked.

“None at all. I’m just exceedingly thirsty,” she said, pouring herself a cup from the pot hanging in the hearth. She added a touch of cream and sugar to make it easier on her stomach and blew on the brew, anxious for it to cool.

“We have everything already underway,” Mrs. Wrigley said, “thanks to these two helping me.”

“Don’t tell me you can cook too?” Catherine asked Rory.

“No, but I follow instructions well,” he said, chuckling.

“He’s doing quite well,” the cook said. “As is Miss Henk. She has the mincemeat all ready for my pie crusts.”

“What’s for breakfast?” Catherine asked. “I’m ravenous.”

“I just put your favorite cinnamon rolls in the oven. They should be ready in about a quarter of an hour,” Mrs. Wrigley answered.

“Is anyone else up yet?” she asked.

“Only Mrs. MacKay,” Miss Henk answered. “She put on her coat and went outside a short while ago.”

“Thank you, Miss Henk,” Catherine said. “I think I shall do the same and join Artis.”

“Don’t stay out in the cold too long,” Rory cautioned.

“I’ll help you with your cloak,” Miss Henk volunteered, drying her hands.

“No, you’re entirely too busy. I can manage,” Catherine said.

She found Artis standing on the front porch drinking her coffee. The crisp air outside made Catherine shiver a little, but it was pleasant, refreshing even after the warmth of the hot kitchen. “Good morning,” she said.

“Good morn to ye,” Artis replied, turning around. “Are ye feelin’ well?”

“Yes, indeed,” Catherine said.

“I’m elated Sam and Rory were able to turn the babe successfully. Ye must be so relieved,” Artis said.

“It was a miracle. It took me a while to go to sleep simply because I had so much to thank God for,” Catherine replied. “Are you enjoying the view?”

“’Tis lovely, without a doubt,” Artis answered, gazing about them.

“Anything like Scotland?” Catherine asked.

“A wee bit. There’s far more trees here than the Highlands. And we have more rivers and lochs. But they are both beautiful in their own way.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Aye. But I miss my Da and Mum more than anything. And the rest of our clan too.”

“Are your parents dead?”

“Aye. My Da died of an illness the year before I left.”

“And your mother?”

Artis swallowed and chewed on her lower lip for a moment before she spoke. “She was murdered, right before my eyes. At the hands of the Countess of Sutherland’s estate factor. He burned our entire village and forced us off our land. My mother refused to leave.”

Catherine gasped and took hold of Artis’ gloved hand. “Oh, I’m so terribly sorry. I wouldn’t have asked had I known.”

“My Mum was a fine woman and I loved her dearly. I miss her greatly,” Artis said. A tear slid down her rosy cheek. She let go of Catherine’s hand and swiped it away.

They both watched a cardinal land on a nearby tree branch. Its striking red color stood out bright and bold against the white snow.

“They say that when a cardinal appears in your yard, it’s a message from heaven,” Catherine told her. “From someone you love.”

“Aye? Do ye suppose it could be my Mum?” Artis sounded like she desperately wanted it to be true.

“I do,” Catherine said. “She heard you say you loved her and missed her. That’s what brought her messenger here.”

“I’m glad,” Artis said, with a wide grin. “Perhaps she’ll see how happy I am here in Kentucky with Bear and his wonderful family. And how very much I love him.”

“And how greatly he loves you,” Catherine said.

Beneath Artis’ pretty smile, Catherine could tell there were hidden wounds. What had she gone through before she found Bear? Catherine sensed that there was a great deal more to Artis’ story. However, now was not that time to pursue it. She needed to get back inside for her baby’s sake.

“You know, I once heard someone say,” Catherine said, “that a person should write their hurts in sand and their blessings in stone. I bet it would work if you wrote your hurts in snow too.”

“Aye, perhaps ‘tis somethin’ I should try. But I’ll write my blessin’s on me heart so I can keep them forever.”

The men, except Rory who stayed to help Mrs. Wrigley, all left very early together to hunt the Christmas turkey. By mid-morning, Catherine heard them raucously singing carols loud enough to awaken every sleeping forest animal.

The women, peering out through the front window, watched them return with a bird so large Catherine wondered how on earth Mrs. Wrigley would ever manage to cook it.

Catherine stopped the half-soused bunch of them at the door. “No, you’re not coming in here with that foul fowl!” she told them. “It smells.”

Bear stared at her for a moment and then smiled cheekily. “It can na smell—‘tis dead! Sam shot it!”

“That’s just silly,” Catherine said, smiling despite herself. She made them promise to pluck and dress the bird before they ever brought it in the house.

“Sam still has an eagle’s eye,” William said, his own eyes looking a bit blurry.

Sam, with an irresistibly charming grin, pointed to one of his eyes, and winked at her. Lord how she loved that smile. His time spent outdoors with his brothers must have been just what Sam needed. There was a bit of a whiskey induced twinkle in his normally steely eyes. His dark windswept hair framed his strong jaw and made him look more relaxed than normal. She took a moment to admire her husband’s impressive build. His coat hung open and his fawn-colored buckskin shirt stretched across the muscles of his broad chest. His black leather breeches clung to narrow hips and muscular legs. She lifted her eyes to his lips and suddenly found herself wanting to kiss them. Quickly, she cleared her throat and looked away, trying to recover her composure.

Stephen seemed to be the most clearheaded and told them, “Come on big brothers, let’s prepare this bird for a feast!”

Bear, William and Stephen stepped off the porch. They sat down at a nearby outdoor table, plopped the bird down in the middle, and started the plucking. She stepped back inside the house, but could hear their boisterous laughter even from inside.

Sam followed her inside to refill their flasks, and then the next thing she knew, he was kissing her. Beyond his cold lips she savored

the warmth of his mouth, tasting the sweet oaky taste of the whiskey he'd drunk. Enjoying the kiss, Catherine sensed his need for her as he tugged her closer. But that would have to wait for now. When his hands started to roam, she reluctantly took a step back, out of his arms, and strode toward the kitchen. Smiling back at her handsome husband, she hurried away.

In the kitchen, she instructed Miss Henk to bring a tray out to the men bearing cups of hot apple cider and Mrs. Wrigley's fresh cinnamon scones.

After they finished the plucking and delivered the bird to Mrs. Wrigley, Sam and Bear carried an enormous oak yule log through the front door and over to the front room hearth.

"That will never fit!" Catherine exclaimed.

"It will. I measured it before I cut it," Sam retorted. "Measure first, cut second."

To her astonishment, it did fit, but dampened by snow it took Sam and Bear both some time to finally get the oak to burn well.

While they worked on the yule log, Catherine asked the other women to scatter about the house and distribute the sachet bags they had all made while the men were hunting. They'd filled the little silk bags with dried rose petals, miniature pine cones, and pungent herbs and spices, including rosemary and cinnamon, infusing the home with a pleasant holiday scent. The delightful smell made all the hard work she'd put into her garden last spring and summer well worth the effort. When the three returned, she gave each of them a larger sachet to take home.

The men gathered outside again and built a huge bonfire, well beyond the front porch so as to not risk setting the house on fire. Catherine peeked out later and saw the bonfire blazing, the older children and men standing around it. She and the other women decided to join them and put on warm coats and cloaks, and bundled up Nicole and Samuel.

Playing his fiddle, William led them in singing several lively songs. As the evening progressed, the carols they would sing would become progressively more spiritual. He would save the most inspirational for last. Those carols, sung by night in the open air, were always the most moving and poignant to Catherine.

In keeping with tradition, at eight o'clock the children gathered in front of the house to welcome the spirit of Old Father Christmas with a merry peal. They formed a parade with makeshift cymbals, bells, and drums—clanging, ringing, and rat-a-tat-tatting—while William followed playing his violin as he tried to make sense of their music. Bear followed William clapping his hands and humming what sounded like a Scottish tune.

Catherine watched for some time and found the entire thing hilarious. Laughing, arm in arm with the other women, she decided the love they all shared tonight would bind their hearts forever.



Sam noticed Catherine turn to leave and followed her. He opened the door for her and helped her out of her cloak, hat, and woolen scarves.

“Are you well?” he asked, removing his own coat and hat.

“Yes, Sam. I feel exceptionally well. I just didn’t want the babe to get too cold. Even with the bonfire, I could feel the temperature dropping.”

“Come, sit beside me by the fire.” He positioned their two chairs next to each other and they watched the flames lick at the huge log. It would likely burn all night and well into Christmas day. “Happy?” he asked.

“You know I am,” she said. “Christmas is my favorite time of year and I love having our family here, Sam.”

She was the only one who could say his name and make it sound special. He savored the feeling it left within him as he reached for her hand.

She gripped his hand and said, “I don’t think I could be happier, unless I were holding our babe in my arms.”

“I can’t wait to see him suckling from your beautiful breasts.”

“Have you noticed how big they’ve gotten?” she asked looking down at her chest.

“How could I not?” he replied, laughing. “I didn’t know that part of you would grow too.”

“Grow? They’ve at least doubled in size! I nearly look indecent in this gown, but everything else I owned looked even more unseemly.”

“You don’t look indecent. You look…”

“Sam!”

“I was about to say voluptuous and alluring.” He raised a brow and grinned roguishly. Then, unable to resist, he stood and drew her into his arms. He kissed her with desperate tenderness. When she deepened the kiss, it soon escalated, igniting a warmth within him hotter than the heat given off by the yule log. The soft scent of her stirred his blood as well. Her mouth tasted of apple cider and honey and he wanted to see what the rest of her tasted like. He trailed kisses down her long white neck, making her shiver a little.

She turned around and pulled her hair aside so that he could kiss the back of her neck as well. “Umm,” she murmured as his lips trailed gentle kisses across her neckline.

Then he placed his palms against her belly, holding both her and their babe, and snugged her against him. He could already sense a bond between the three of them.

When he reluctantly released her, she giggled a little and whispered. “You know, it won’t be long until we can…”

“Yes?” he pretended not to understand.

“You know…”

“Know what?” He raised his brows inquiringly.

When Catherine realized he was joshing with her, she punched his arm playfully.

“I’ll count the minutes,” he said, staring at the tantalizing moistness of her full mouth. “But after you deliver, you must take your time healing. Just tell me when you’re ready.”

“You’ll be the first to know,” she said, grinning widely.

Chapter 30

Christmas Day, 1799

Their Christmas table aglow with a dozen beeswax candles, Sam said a prayer of thanks, and then stood to make a toast. “To love, unity, friendship, wisdom, and brotherhood,” he said, holding his cup high.

“Hear, hear,” the men all chorused.

“To love, unity, family, faith, and sisterhood,” Catherine said, holding her cup high and looking at Jane, Kelly, and Artis.

“Hear, hear,” the women all repeated.

“And to our courageous brother John who gave his life for me,” Sam said.

“To John,” everyone repeated.

“And to President Washington,” Sam said, “may he rest in eternal peace.”

“And to…”

“Nay, no more toasts,” Bear declared, cutting William off. “A man can na fill his empty belly on toasts and the smell of that turkey is drivin’ me daft.”

“I was just going to say a toast of thanks to our fine cooks,” William said.

Everyone glanced over at the two women, who sat next to Catherine at the table with them since it was Christmas. Mrs. Wrigley’s family lived in Lexington, so far away that she visited them only every other Christmas. And Miss Henk had no family at all.

“Mrs. Wrigley and Miss Henk, you *have* certainly outdone yourselves,” Catherine said. “Thank you for preparing such a splendid meal. Bear, since you’re seated in the middle of the table, would you

be kind enough to start carving that enormous turkey?"

"Aye!" Bear said and stood. "It smells good now, doesn't it Catherine?" he said with a wink at her as he picked up the carving knife.

"Indeed," she said, chuckling. "Let's not keep the children waiting. Serve them some turkey first."

"Yeah!" the older children all said.

"Yaaay," Nicole and Samuel imitated. Nicole and Samuel both sat in their mother's laps.

Sam gazed appreciatively at everyone seated at the table—his family. The entire group looked resplendent dressed in their best clothing, but the festive colors worn by the women and girls brightened the room as much as the candles. As she always did on special occasions, Catherine put on a magnificent gown. Trimmed with delicate white lace, the deep rose shade matched the color of her lips and the tint of her high cheekbones. The other women wore fine gowns too. Jane had dressed in what looked like a new green gown. Kelly's light blue gown complemented her blonde hair. And Artis looked like a fine jewel in her royal blue gown. Martha and Polly looked especially pretty in red dresses trimmed with white bows. And Mrs. Wrigley and Miss Henk both wore dressier clothing than they normally did and had fixed their hair up attractively.

In addition to the roasted turkey with chestnut stuffing, the large dining table was laden with holiday favorites. The delicious fragrances wafting from smoked ham, mustard and onion sauces, potatoes, mashed turnips, candied sweet potatoes, buttered squash, beans, and fresh bread and butter, filled the room. Pumpkin, apple, and mincemeat pies, and brandied peaches, along with ginger cutouts for the children, sat nearby on the side table, reminding them all to save room for dessert. And several decanters full of wines, brandy, and rum punches, waited for them to wash it all down with.

"Rory helped with dinner too," Mrs. Wrigley said, smiling at the doctor.

"It was my great pleasure to lend a hand," he said, with a twinkle in his kind blue eyes.

"And a strong arm too," Mrs. Wrigley added, blushing and smiling.

“And Artis helped,” Miss Henk said.

“You helped cook?” Sam asked Artis.

“Aye, I want to learn all I can from Mrs. Wrigley while I’m here. Keepin’ Bear’s belly full requires a great effort.”

Everyone laughed as they filled their plates and passed dishes around.

“Mrs. Wrigley can teach you how to keep a man’s stomach full. I can attest to that,” Sam said. “It’s not fancy but it is delicious.” He took a bite, savoring the flavors, of the mouth-watering turkey and stuffing that Bear just put on his plate.

“Ye can na get full on fancy,” Bear said. “I prefer good to fancy any day. This Christmas dinner is just the thing. I purely like it!”

“Uncle Sam,” Polly asked, “why is it important to celebrate Christmas?” Like her father was as a child, Polly was always asking probing questions. She cocked her head to one side, waiting for an answer.

Sam hoped he could provide her with an answer she would understand. “That’s an excellent question, Polly,” he said. “There are two kinds of knowledge. Intellectual knowledge—what we can learn with our heads. And then there’s spiritual knowledge—what we learn when we open our hearts to the spirit of God. Each kind of knowledge is important and has its place. And at Christmas, we remember that the Lord came to earth to share that spiritual knowledge with mankind. It was a very great gift to us, one we can only accept with our hearts. We celebrate that gift by giving gifts to each other.”

“I like all my presents,” Martha said, smiling prettily. “But I like the tea set best.”

“And I like my doll with the glass eyes and blue dress,” Polly said. “But I like the present Jesus brought too,” she added, nodding her head thoughtfully.

“I love all my presents!” Little John said. “Especially the toy soldiers.”

“We saved one of your presents for after our dinner, Little John,” Sam said.

“You did!” his son said, sounding excited.

“Aye,” Bear answered, “and I saved one for Artis too.”

Artis turned toward Bear, a playful look on her face. “I can well imagine.”

Bear rolled his eyes as he said, “Nay, another kind of surprise!”

Jane cleared her throat. “Perhaps you newlyweds should discuss something else.” She glanced toward the children.

“Jane, what’s yer secret to a happy marriage?” Artis asked.

“It’s simple,” she said, with a chuckle and a smile at Stephen. “I always let him have my way.”

Aside from Stephen, the table erupted in laughter.

“When I wanted to move to Kentucky,” Stephen pointed out, “you were quite stubborn about not wanting to leave New Hampshire and still we came.”

“This is true. However, I did eventually acquiesce,” Jane said, as she buttered a thick slice of crusty bread.

“We should all thank Stephen,” Sam said. “Were it not for his courage to come here, I would have never met Catherine.”

“And I would never have met Kelly,” William said.

“And I would have never fallen in love with the most beautiful woman in the world,” Bear said, smiling down at Artis.

“And we didn’t just go west—but West—the very edge of our young country,” Sam said, “the *frontier*.” He loved the word frontier and everything it meant. It signaled a pristine world of the unknown and the undiscovered. And it offered a new beginning for those brave enough to challenge it.

“It was certainly a challenge getting here,” Jane said pensively.

“Challenges and obstacles can be stepping stones or stumbling blocks, depending on how we react to them,” Sam said. “We can’t control what happens to us in life. We can only control how well we react to what happens.”

“How true,” Artis said. “I certainly learned that.”

“So did I,” Kelly said.

“And I admire you both for how you overcame,” Sam said. “It took a great deal of courage.”

“Women are strong,” Rory said. “Most men, including me, would buckle under what those two have faced.”

“That’s because women *are* stronger than men!” Martha declared.

“And what makes you say that, young lady,” Stephen asked.

“Because God must think so. He had them have the babies,” she explained.

“No one can argue with that,” Stephen said. “I wouldn’t want to suffer through what I’ve seen Jane experience.”

“Is anyone ready for dessert?” Catherine quickly asked.

Sam wondered if she wanted to change the subject because she faced what they all knew would be a painful experience.

“I am!” Little John declared.

“Me too,” the girls both said at once.

“I’ll serve them,” Mrs. Wrigley said, standing. “I made them some of my gingerbread men.” She handed one to all five children.

“Look, mine has a funny face,” Polly said.

“Just like you, you little pixie,” Mrs. Wrigley teased.

“All right, eat your cookies while Bear and I go to the barn,” Sam said.

“But we haven’t eaten pie,” Bear protested.

“We can eat it later,” Sam said. “Let’s go.”

The two men threw on their coats and hurried out.

“I can na wait to see Artis’ face,” Bear said as they walked.

“A minute ago, your mind was only on pie,” Sam pointed out.

“My mouth was waterin’ for that apple pie,” he complained. “But yer right, now is the time to bring our surprises in.”

“Let’s hurry,” Sam said.

They rushed into the hands’ quarters and put out the small hearth fire with the sand bucket that was always kept nearby.

“Here,” Sam said, “I brought two ribbons to tie around their necks.”

“Ye’re gettin’ softhearted in yer old age big brother. I can na believe a fierce warrior like yerself would do somethin’ this thoughtful.”

“Cease talking nonsense and tie the ribbon on,” Sam grumbled. “Enough with your jabbering.”

“Now that sounds more like ye,” Bear said, bending to the task. He tried several times to tie a bow and failed miserably. His fingers were just too big.

“Let me do it,” Sam said, grabbing the ribbon. “Hold this one.”

Bear examined the ribbon Sam just tied on Little John’s pup. “Ye can even tie pretty bows now?”

“I said quit your prattle,” Sam scolded and quickly tied the other bow on. “All right, they’re ready. Here’s Artis’ pup.”

They hurried back to the front porch and Sam stuck his head in. Using his most authoritative Captain’s voice, he called out, “Little John and Artis, stand next to each other in the front room. Then, everyone cover your eyes. No peeking!”

He and Bear scooted in, holding the pups behind their backs in case anyone was peeking. Polly peeked, of course, and she squealed a little.

“Little John and Artis,” Bear said.

“Aye,” Artis said.

“Yes,” Little John said.

Sam and Bear set the pups down in front of the two.

“Open your eyes!” Sam said.

Everyone opened their eyes and Little John started jumping up and down and clapping. Then he bent over, as Artis was doing, and

picked up his puppy. A tiny pink tongue started licking Little John's hands and face making his son giggle hysterically. Sam had never seen him so happy.

Artis was holding the pup's head against her face and he was licking her tears of joy. "He's black," she said, "just like my old Wilson."

"Aye," Bear said. "I asked William to find a black one. And one that would grow big too."

She reached up and kissed him, deeply, right there in front of the entire family. "Thank ye," she said, when she finished.

Bear just stood there smiling from one ear to the other.

"Thank you, Pa," Little John said. "This is one Christmas I will *never* forget."

"What will you name him?" Sam asked.

Little John looked thoughtful. "Happy! Because I'm so happy right now."

Chapter 31

Christmas Evening, 1799

Catherine watched the children and Artis play with the puppies while the other women and Rory cleared the dining table and stored the food away for the evening. Rory had insisted that she stay off her feet and she readily complied. The big meal had her feeling a little off and she leaned back in her chair, relieved to be sitting down.

The other men finished their drinks outside around the bonfire, and then came back inside to play a game of Hot Cockles. Sam was the one now being blindfolded.

He put his hands behind his back, palms up. Each of the men would take a turn slapping Sam's upturned hand and he would try to guess which of the other players just hit him. When he did so correctly, the caught player would have to take their turn in the center. They spun Sam around several times and then stopped him. Bear snuck up behind him and slapped both of Sam's palms.

"It's Bear!" Sam said.

"Bloody hell, he guessed on the first try," Bear complained, "how could ye possibly know?"

"I could smell puppy on you," Sam said.

The men roared with laughter.

Catherine wished the four brothers could always be this happy.

Then, her thoughts turned inward and she gasped. A rush of warm liquid came from deep inside of her and spread between her legs. "Sam!" Catherine called out. "My water just broke."

Sam tore off the blindfold and raced to her side.

"Mrs. Wrigley, Rory, come quickly," Sam called toward the kitchen.

“Any pains?” Rory asked as soon as he was by her side.

“Yes,” Catherine told him. “Worse than before and I believe my water just broke.”

“Are you ready to have that baby?” he asked kindly.

“My heart’s ready, but my mind is rather hesitant,” she answered truthfully. “I’m worried something will go wrong.”

“Everything will be fine,” Rory assured her in a calm voice.

Sam and Rory both helped her make her way to the bedroom.

Jane followed too. “I sent Kelly and Artis to help Miss Henk bring clean linens and warm water,” Jane said.

Mrs. Wrigley hurried in and Sam asked the cook and Jane to help Catherine out of her gown.

As the men turned to leave, Catherine grabbed her abdomen as another cramp seized her. “Oh golly,” she said. If it was this dreadful at the beginning, labor was going to be worse than she thought.

“Come and get me when she’s settled into the bed,” Rory said. “Come along Sam. There’s nothing for you to do but wait.”

“I’ve never been good at waiting,” Sam said.



“Who is watching the children?” Sam asked, suddenly wondering where Little John was.

“Miss Henk is,” Stephen answered. “She’s upstairs with them and the puppies. They all have their new toys and books as well as two frisky pups. That should entertain them for a long while. Then she’ll put them to bed while we wait for your babe to arrive.”

And wait they did, for hours. Unfocused and troubled, Sam stared into the flames of the front room hearth.

“Sam,” Bear said, placing a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “I just asked if Rory told ye how long this might take.”

Sam had become numb to what was going on around him, and he didn’t even hear Bear’s question the first time his brother asked.

Never having had a child of his own, Bear seemed nearly as anxious as he was.

“He said it could be a few hours or take a very long time,” Sam answered.

“Did he say anything else?” William asked.

“He said her contractions may be strong and close, or mild and far apart. Even if they are close, they might slow down. Then, later, they start up again, and are worse,” he answered.

“’Tis clear as mud,” Bear complained.

Sam spun around toward his brothers. “I hate waiting out here. I should be in there!”

“No, there are four women in there to help her and the good doctor,” Stephen said firmly. “Your worried presence would just make her tense. Believe me, she’s better off with you out here.”

He gripped the edges of the mantel tightly in his hands to keep himself from leaving. Rory had asked him to wait here and he needed to do what the doctor said, for Catherine’s sake.

Sam’s heart pounded when he heard Rory walk into the room.

“Things are going well. Mrs. Wrigley is checking to see how much Catherine has dilated,” Rory reported.

Sam let out a breath of relief. “Thank you, Rory. Please keep us updated. This waiting is taxing.” In truth, he’d never been this scared even during the worst battle he’d ever fought with Red Coats or Indians. But he wasn’t about to admit that to anyone, even himself. He needed to stay strong for Catherine.

But his resolve to remain a pillar of strength waned when he heard his wife cry out again.

“Sam,” Rory said, “Catherine will be fine. She’s young, strong, and built for having babies. And the babe is still in the correct position.”

“Could he turn again?” Sam asked.

“No, he’s too busy getting set to meet all of you,” Rory said with a big smile as he left.

The thought of meeting his son cheered Sam. He couldn't help but grin. Then he heard Catherine let out an anguished cry and his mood plummeted. His long legs sprang toward their bedroom, but Bear and William held him back. "Let me go!" he roared.

"Sam," Bear said, "Ye do na need to be in there."

"He's right," Stephen confirmed. "You don't want to see any of it."

"But she needs me!" Sam protested.

"Nay, she only needs the women and the doctor now," Bear said.

Sam forced himself to calm and took a step back as his brothers released him.

"Sam, why don't you show us your new stallion?" Stephen suggested.

"Go look at him yourself," he growled.

"I was just curious to see if your horse looked like he could hold up to my stallion in the Twelfth Day Horse Race," Stephen said.

Stephen was obviously trying to distract Sam. His curiosity was sparked. "You're entering the race?" he asked, surprised.

"Indeed, and I'm going to win," Stephen said. It was no idle boast. Stephen knew horses and if he thought he could win, he probably could.

"Nay, 'tis Artis' horse that will win," Bear declared.

"You're entering the race too? Sam asked, surprised again.

"Nay, Artis is," Bear said. "When Jane told her about the race, she set her mind to enter it."

"Artis!" Sam and Stephen both exclaimed.

"Aye, she can out ride all of us," Bear said, pride lighting up his eyes.

"You can't be serious," Stephen said. "A woman can't enter the race."

"I dare ye to tell *her* that," Bear said, lifting his bushy red brows

significantly.

Stephen looked to William for support.

“I know better,” William said. “The lady lived with us for a while, before she married Bear. She can ride better than me, and if you tell her she can’t do something, she’ll likely do it just to prove you wrong.”

“Ye got it right, brother,” Bear said.

“But Bear, racing is dangerous, particularly with so many horses in the race. There could be dozens of entries coming from all over Kentucky and Virginia,” Sam said.

“Ye’ve na seen Artis ride,” Bear said.

Sam shook his head. “If you won’t do it, I guess I will have to try to persuade her not to race.”

“I wish you luck,” William said, with a smile in his eyes. “I don’t think she’s likely to change her mind. Kelly told me that Artis has her heart set on winning.”

“Frankly, so do I,” Stephen said. “I need the money to buy more cattle. Colonel Logan wants me to supply beef for both Fort Logan and Fort Harrod.”

“That’s marvelous news. You know you can always borrow…” Sam started to say.

“No,” Stephen stopped him. “I appreciate your generosity, but I want to buy these cattle entirely on my own. The race purse will allow me to do that,” Stephen said. “It will also allow me to add on to our home. We’ll need another room soon. Jane isn’t sure yet, but she thinks she may be with child again.”

Sam decided right then and there that he wouldn’t enter the race after all. He wasn’t going to race against Stephen when winning meant so much to his brother.

“Is your stallion ready to race?” Sam asked.

“I think so,” Stephen said. “He shows every sign of being at least as great a horse as his sire.”

“And the first George was some horse,” Sam said. “The best I’ve

ever known."

"As soon as Catherine has the babe, and you've had a chance to rest," Stephen said, "you can help me get the stallion ready. He needs to be raced against other horses. He's never done that."

"I'd be happy to," Sam said, "but if I can't talk Artis out of entering the race, she might object to my helping you."

"Nay, she's an excellent trainer herself," Bear explained. "Trainin' horses was one of her duties at the Virginia plantation she worked on for seven years. She raced Glasgow many times around the plantation's track."

Perplexed, Sam stared questioningly at Bear.

"'Tis a long story. Sit down and I'll explain it to you," Bear said.

They all took seats and Bear explained how Artis' wound up in Kentucky. He started with her mother's murder and her village in the Highlands being burned. Homeless and alone, she was forced to indenture herself in the colonies. Sam was amazed to learn that when Bear met Artis, she had just finished serving her seven year indentured servitude where she worked as a trainer in the plantation's horse barn. She helped break in the yearlings and then started getting on the young horses at the farm's track. From there she learned to gallop and fell in love with horses and racing them. "But her indenture was just the beginning of her troubles," Bear continued. "Glasgow was stolen by a man obsessed with pursuing her. Later, when we recovered the horse in Kentucky, William wrote to her former employer who wrote back that Artis should keep the stallion for all she'd done for the plantation."

Bear seemed to sense Sam's restlessness and gave them only a few details about her pursuer, saying it was another long story he'd save for another time.

He was restless, and wanted to hear the rest of Artis' story. For now, though, he was just glad that Bear had been there to help her.

The discussion about the race and listening to Bear tell them about Artis' life had served as a welcome distraction, but all the while, Sam's insides continued to churn. By the time Bear finished, his stomach was turning cartwheels and his heart couldn't seem to beat in a regular pattern. Nervous energy forced him stand and start pacing. Then he stopped suddenly. "Do you think Catherine is all right? Why

hasn't Rory given us an update?" he demanded, wringing his hands and eyeballing his brothers.

"He's probably busy," William suggested.

"Busy with what? Catherine has to do all the work!" Sam swore.

He wondered again what was happening.

Until he heard the cry of a new voice in the world.

Chapter 32

Catherine's eyes blurred with tears of overwhelming happiness. She swiped her knuckle across her lashes to clear them as Rory held her son up for her to see for the first time. Joy bubbled out of her as he cried, evidence that he was breathing and well. For a moment, the sight of him seemed to give her a glimpse of heaven. The sound of his first cry took her breath away and made her laugh and cry, a wonderful mix of love infused emotions.

A Christmas miracle!

The babe's cries made her reach out for her son.

"Wait just a moment while I tie off the cord," Rory told her. He placed the babe on a clean towel near her and he and Mrs. Wrigley took care of the cord.

Then Mrs. Wrigley washed Catherine and removed the soiled sheets, while Jane bathed the babe with a small wet cloth and a bowl of warm water, removing the thick, pasty, whitish coating, which they all said was normal, from his skin.

"Let me examine him, when you're through Jane," Rory said. Understandably, he sounded tired. He'd been awake for hours. He washed his hands, put away his supplies, and took a seat by the hearth. Then she he heard him let out a long sigh.

"Look how black his hair is. Just like yours," Jane told her. "He's such a handsome boy."

"He is and he's huge," Kelly said, helping Catherine discretely remove her sweat soaked shift and don a fresh one. "I can't believe he came out of you. If I hadn't seen it, I would not have believed it."

"It's no wonder he got stuck in the wrong position," Rory said. "He must be at least twenty-two inches long."

Artis still stood by the bed, body stiff, and speechless. Her green eyes widened, she simply stared at the squirming red babe.

“Artis, is that the first birth you’ve witnessed?” Rory asked her.

“Aye! The first birth of a person,” she said. “I’ve seen countless lambs and foals born. But this was far different. The sheep and horses did na cry out. If we had na given Catherine this rag to bite down on, her throat would likely be raw from her cries.”

It had been Artis’ job to hand her the cloth whenever a sharp contraction or pain hit. And Artis was right. Not wanting to scare the children or Sam, she’d managed to stifle most of her moans and screams into the rolled cloth.

“It’s a pain you soon forget,” Mrs. Wrigley told her.

“’Twas also far grander than an animal birth,” Artis said, “a new human soul coming into this world. God bless him!”

“God bless him,” they all echoed.

“And ye were so brave! To have endured such agony without ever complainin’,” Artis told her. “And ye only shed a few wee tears.”

“Thank you, Artis, and everyone else, for your help,” she told them.

She sat up and watched as Jane wrapped a miniature sheet and blanket loosely around the infant and handed the tiny bundle to the doctor.

Still seated, Rory laid her crying babe across his lap, unfolded the blanket, and gave her son a quick examination. The babe’s cries tugged at her heart.

Catherine held her breath until Rory stood and said, “Here you go, mother. He looks well and exceptionally healthy.”

Rory handed her what had to be the most beautiful babe in the entire world.

Her mouth fell open as he ceased crying the instant she hugged him against her. He smelled like fresh air, soap, and lavender and his skin was unbelievably smooth and soft.

She gazed proudly at her son. The moment she’d dreamt of so often over the last months finally happened. She held her precious son in her arms.

A babe that was half Sam and half her. And all theirs.

Her heart was so full, tears threatened again. She couldn't wait even another minute to show their babe to his father. "Artis, would you go get Sam, please?"

Artis' face lit, as though she were honored to be the one to fetch Sam. "Are ye sure ye're ready?"

"I'm sure," Catherine said. "Tell him to come and meet his son."

"Aye. May the other men come in too?" Artis asked. "Bear will want to, I know. He'll likely be hard to stop."

"Not just yet. Hold them back a few more minutes, until after I'm more presentable," she said. "I want to wash my face and put my robe on."

Artis left and Catherine gazed back down at her babe's sweet face. Never had she set eyes on such an amazing sight. He hadn't opened his eyes yet, but she was sure they would be blue since she and Sam both had blue eyes. He had a complete head of hair, Sam's strong jaw and chin, and her nose. His features were so flawless that any more perfection would have made him too beautiful for a boy. "You'll be a fine man someday, just like your father," she told him.

The door flew open and Sam stormed into the room and rushed to her side. "Are you all right?" Then he glanced down and saw the swaddled bundle in her arms. He took a sharp intake of breath and froze.

"I'm fine. Meet your son," she said, angling the babe so Sam could see his face.

Sam touched the top of the babe's head with the tip of his finger as if to verify that he was real and then smiled broadly.

"May I hold him?" he asked.

"Of course," she answered.

Sam reached out and gingerly took their son into his arms. Cradling him tenderly, he stared in awe, his eyes glistening.

If she lived to be a hundred, she would never forget the look of wonderment on her husband's handsome face. She also saw something she'd never seen before—a new contentment.

But when he shifted his gaze to her, she saw things she readily recognized. Love. Respect. And strength.

“He’s spectacular,” he whispered. “Remarkable.”

“Yes, he is, isn’t he,” she agreed, “because his father is too.”

“Hello, my boy,” Sam said. “Merry Christmas.”

The squirming babe reached up toward Sam’s face. His movements were a bit jerky, but he seemed determined.

Catherine watched in amazement as their son, seeming quite alert, tightened his tiny fingers around Sam’s chin.

Sam’s head was lowered, but she saw a delicate tear trail down his rugged face.

The sight of the two together put a smile on her face and an imprint on her heart that she was certain would last a lifetime.

“He opened his eyes,” Sam breathed, “he’s looking right at me.”

“What color are they?” she asked.

“Deep blue, like yours,” he answered.

Sam continued to gaze into his son’s eyes as Rory stepped up next to him. “Are they both well? Any concerns?” he asked the doctor.

“They are both hale and hearty,” Rory said. “Catherine did not tear as badly as some women are prone to. She should be up and about in a couple of days and completely back to normal in a couple of weeks.”

Sam let out a deep breath. “I’m so relieved you are both well,” he told her. “Rory, we have you to thank for that. Without you…,” he swallowed hard, “this could have been a disaster.”

“Thank you for believing in me,” Rory said. “There was a time when no one did. Even myself.”

“You are a fine doctor, Rory,” Catherine said. “I only wish you lived nearby.”

“One never knows what the future holds,” Rory said. “Sometimes our lives change when we least expect it.”

“Indeed,” Catherine agreed. Three years ago, she never would have expected this new life. She not only had a new husband—one that actually loved and appreciated her this time—she had two sons. And a new home. And a wonderful large family of brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews.

“All the hard work is done, Catherine,” Rory said. “Now all you have to do is rest and be sure your son starts to suckle. Just lay his mouth near a nipple. He’ll know what to do. We’ll give you parents some privacy now.”

Carrying away all the soiled rags, linen, and water, Kelly and Jane followed Rory out, but Mrs. Wrigley lingered for a moment smiling at them. “You’re the very picture of a happy family. I’ll go wake Little John and tell him the good news.”

“No, let him sleep,” Catherine said. “I’m so weary now and it’s so late. We’ll see him in the morning after we’ve had a little sleep. In fact, please tell all the others that we will see them all in the morning.”

“All right. Then I’ll make you some more of my mugwort tea,” the cook said. “It will help you sleep and ease your soreness. In the morning you can sit in a few inches of warm water to soothe your tenderness.”

“How do you feel?” Sam asked after she left. “I know that was beyond difficult. You must be incredibly weary.”

“I am, and I’m sore of course. Yet I feel surprisingly relaxed,” she answered. “I think I could sleep for a week though.”

“I feel the same way,” he said. “I’m glad that interminable wait is over.”

“What time is it anyway?” she asked.

“I don’t know exactly. But it’s nearing midnight,” Sam said. “So he was born on Christmas day.”

“Waiting must have been hard for you,” she said, sympathizing.

“It was nothing compared to what you endured. But it was a long night. It started snowing again a couple of hours ago.” He glanced over at the hearth. “Your fire has gone out. You must be getting cold.” With one arm he grabbed her robe off the chair at her dressing table and laid it over her shoulders. “I’ll bring in some logs in a minute and

get the fire blazing again."

"That will be nice, but first, let's see if he will start nursing," Catherine said, sitting up a little more. "Hand him to me." She could see that Sam was reluctant to let go of his new treasure. "You can have him back in a little while. I promise."

Sam gently laid their son in her arms and propped a couple of pillows behind her back. Then he gave her an unhurried kiss. His lips tasted wonderful—warm, soft, and full of love.

As she kissed him back, she let her own lips convey all the joy she felt in her heart. She was loved, blessed, grateful, relieved, and so very happy.

When he stood and gazed down at her, she could see those same emotions in his eyes. And when he smiled, his broad chest swelling with pride, he was the most handsome man she had ever seen. Her husband.

And now he was also the father of her son.

With her heart beating rapidly, a mixture of excitement and trepidation swirling around it, she placed the babe's mouth to her nipple. To her relief, he immediately latched on and started sucking quite hard.

"That's my boy," Sam said. His smile broadened in approval.

A tiny hand touched her breast above her heart and it made happiness surge through her heart. She exhaled a long sigh of contentment and peace.

They both gloried briefly in the shared moment and then she asked, "What shall we name him?"

Sam touched the fine dark wisps of hair on their babe's head with the tip of his finger and warmly smiled down at her.

"How about Rory?"

Chapter 33

Sam woke to the sound of…a baby crying. It took him a second to absorb the fact that it was *his babe*.

"He's just hungry," Catherine said. "I'll take care of him. Go back to sleep."

Sam doubted that he could fall back to sleep so he rolled toward her on his side. With his head propped on his elbow, he reached over and put his first finger in Rory's fist. The strength of the babe's grip astounded him. "How are you feeling this morning?" he asked her.

"Sore, but well. I'll be fine in a couple of days," she said as she brought their son to a breast. He rooted around for a moment and then greedily sucked. Her face was alive with affection and delight.

They both watched with fascination until he seemed to finish.

"Shall we dress and go introduce our son to his uncles and cousins?" The excitement on her face was echoed in her voice.

"Yes!" he said, excited himself. "If you feel up to it."

"I do. I feel like celebrating!"

They both washed up, donned their clothing, and then dressed Rory for the first time.

"He seems so tiny," Sam said.

"Tiny! He didn't feel tiny coming out of me," she protested. "He's enormous."

"He is a rather long-legged fellow," he said, smiling, "just like me."

"If he keeps eating like he just did, he'll stay that way," she said, laughing.

"You look lovely," he said, admiring Catherine from head to toe.

She had tried on a number of her better gowns to find one that fit well. She selected a high-waisted gown that was one of his favorites. The rich blue silk and satin complemented her dark hair. And the lace-trimmed neckline showed off her full rounded breasts.

"Thank you, husband," she said, putting the finishing touches on her hair. "It will be a while before my waist is back to normal, but it's nice to be able to see my feet again."

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready. Will you please carry him out?"

"How shall I carry him? In my arms or over my shoulder?"

Catherine grinned and then patiently showed him.

He picked the babe up cautiously. When Rory didn't cry, Sam's mouth curved into a smile. "I might just get the hang of this."

Catherine placed her hand on his forearm for support and they slowly made their way to the noisy front room. In addition to the puppies yapping, Sam heard Bear and Stephen arguing about who would win the horse race, Jane telling the children a story, and Mrs. Wrigley revealing to Artis and Kelly how she made the biscuits he could smell baking. The yeasty fragrance made his mouth water.

"Would anyone here like to see the most handsome baby in all of Kentucky?" Sam asked above all the commotion.

Everyone froze as the three entered the room and then the family rushed toward them.

"Easy, wait, don't crowd," he cautioned. "Let Little John come up first."

They all moved aside as his oldest son made his way to the front, eyes wide as goose eggs. "I thought he would be bigger," Little John said.

"He soon will be," Stephen said, "just look at Samuel here." The smiling toddler sat on Stephen's hip, his little legs already almost reaching Stephen's knees.

"I have a brother!" Little John said, proudly turning to tell everyone.

“And he’s a braw one. ’Tis the longest new bairn I’ve ever seen,” Bear said, holding his palms about three feet apart.

Artis laughed. “Ye’re exaggeratin’ again, Bear. He’s na *that* long! But the lad will surely grow to be as tall as Sam.”

Rory peeked in over Kelly’s shoulder and then glanced up at Sam. “What’d you name him?”

Sam and Catherine glanced at each other and then they both looked back at the smiling doctor and said, “Rory.”

Rory’s face paled. Then his eyes widened and his voice quavered as he asked, “You named him after *me*?”

“We did,” Catherine said. “If not for you, he might not be alive. And I most certainly wouldn’t be. We owe you so much.”

“Are you pleased?” Sam asked.

Though he didn’t answer straightaway, Rory’s face spoke for him. He looked at the babe wistfully, his eyes misty. “I…” he tried, but stopped, then peered at Sam and then at Catherine. “I am honored,” he finally said.

Kelly kissed her father’s cheek. “I’m proud of you Papa.”

“And since my own father is departed, I would be grateful if you would agree to be his honorary grandfather,” Sam said.

Again, Rory appeared taken back but enormously pleased. “Thank you,” was all he could manage.

“Well then,” William said, “we will have to think of a nickname for either the bairn or Dr. McGuffin.”

“Oh no, I’m too old to start responding to a new name,” Rory protested.

“We can’t have two Rorys in the same house,” Kelly said. “We will just have to come up with a nickname for the babe.”

“Let’s have a contest,” Martha suggested. “The person who comes up with the best nickname by popular vote wins.”

“What will the prize be?” Polly asked.

“No contests and no prizes,” Sam said. “We will just call the good

doctor, Dr. McGuffin. That's more respectful anyway."

"You can just call me Doc," Rory said.

"Would you like some breakfast?" Mrs. Wrigley asked them.

"Yes, indeed," Catherine answered. "I am ravenous."

The rest of the morning, sitting at the dining table, they all ate, and talked, drank coffee, and talked some more. Catherine soon grew tired and went back to bed, and Jane and Kelly went along to help her with the babe and then a soothing bath. The children and Artis bundled up in warm clothing and went outside to play with the puppies. Mrs. Wrigley was in the kitchen cleaning up and Dr. McGuffin, not surprisingly, volunteered to help her. Miss Henk was upstairs cleaning up the guest rooms.

Sam and his brothers decided to go outside and stretch their legs.

"You must be incredibly proud," William told Sam as they walked. "You haven't stopped smiling all morning."

"I have been blessed beyond my wildest dreams," Sam said. "This has been the best Christmas of my life."

"Except for that nastiness with the bloody bastards," Stephen said, "I think we would all agree."

"William, we know ye got the prisoners safely delivered to the jail. But whatever happened when ye questioned them? Did ye learn anythin' new?" Bear asked.

"Getting them to the jail went smoothly, although they smelled worse than a dead skunk by the time we arrived," William said. "Not wanting to spoil our holiday together and the joy of your son's arrival, Sam, I've been waiting until an appropriate time to bring them up. I know it is a rather vexing subject. Since we have some privacy here in the woods, I did learn some things that will both interest and concern you."

"Such as?" Sam asked, stopping and looking intently at William.

"A wealthy man from Boston hired Dixon and the other two men. He owns a number of companies in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. But evidently some of them are not doing well. Looking for other more profitable business ventures, and hoping to secure a lucrative government contract, this businessman hired geologists to

inspect and take samples from all the mountains in New Hampshire. He was hoping to find gold."

"What did they find?" Stephen asked.

"They did find gold—in several mountains," William answered.

"And in Wiley Mountain?" Sam asked.

"Lots of it. And lesser deposits of silver ore and other minerals."

"Sweet heavens!" Bear said. "Now Catherine is na the only one who is wealthy."

"It's our family's mountain," Sam said. "I just inherited it. If there's wealth there, it will be shared wealth for all of us."

"There's more," William said.

A cool breeze rustled the leaves in the nearby trees as Sam waited to hear the rest.

"This loathsome businessman promised Dixon twenty percent of all sales of gold and silver mined from your mountain, and ten percent to the other two men. What's more, Crowell told me, when I questioned him by himself, that Dixon is a charlatan and a fraud who lives well above his means with his wife in Boston. He said Dixon would do anything to support his life of luxury."

"That comes as no surprise," Sam said.

"The wealthy man told Dixon and Crowell, who is also married, that under no circumstances were they to return without the deed. If they did, they would *not* live to regret it," William told them.

"That explains why they were willing to commit kidnapping and abduction of a woman to get it," Stephen said.

William turned to Stephen. "Dixon confessed, bragged even, that he planned to take Jane to Bardstown or Harrodsburg and hide her in an inn there. He would have written to you and Sam, demanding that the deed be delivered to him at another location. Once he received it, and if he wasn't followed, he said he would have released Jane and let her find her own way back."

"The bloody bugger," Stephen swore. "It's fortunate for him that you intercepted him first. I would have killed the man."

“’Twas a half-cocked plan he had,” Bear swore. “I say again, he’s an idjit.”

“How did you get the two to reveal so much?” Sam asked.

“The judge promised to not hang them in exchange for truthfully answering all of my questions,” William explained. “At first they refused to talk, but when they heard the ring of hammers as men started building a gallows inside the fort’s enclosure, they quickly made the deal. I’ve found, in the past, that the haunting sound of gallows rising can be quite persuasive. As I expected, it worked to make them talk.”

“But they should have been hung!” Stephen avowed.

“If we hung them, we would never have gotten information out of them. It was more important to learn who sent them, and why, than it was to see them at the end of a rope,” William insisted.

Sam had to agree, although he didn’t like the idea of Dixon evading capital punishment.

“If they won’t be hung, what punishment will they get?” Stephen demanded.

“Men like those two should be locked up, but as yet, we have no prisons in Kentucky. Our jails are used only for pre-trial and sentencing detention of criminal defendants. They will likely be put in the stocks for a time, receive a fine, whipping, and hand branding,” William answered. “The judge agreed that Dixon should be punished more severely than Crowell.”

“Then what happens to them?” Bear asked.

“They will be let go and sent back to Massachusetts,” William said.

“Did they ever reveal the name of the man in Boston who sent them?” Sam asked.

“Yes, but before I tell you that, you should know that this wealthy man told Dixon to do anything necessary to get the deed. Even kill you.”

“Good Lord!” Bear said, running his big hand through his hair.

William continued. “In fact, he encouraged Dixon and his men to

murder you after they got the signed deed. If they did, Dixon and the others would receive a healthy bonus."

That explained why the man Sam shot had wielded his weapon so freely, Sam thought. Whoever this man in Boston was, he would likely send others to do what Dixon failed to do. Taking it all in, Sam drove his fist into the palm of his hand. "This mess is far from over."

William wasn't through and held up a forefinger. "Dixon received one other strange directive. Under no circumstances was he to harm Catherine. How did this man in Boston know your wife's name?" William asked.

Sam's brows drew together and his hand clutched the hilt of his long knife. "Who sent him? His name?" he demanded.

"Remington Forbes."

Sam stopped breathing for a moment.

It was Catherine's father's name.

Chapter 34

Sam decided not to tell Catherine that it was her father who sent the three men. He would keep the name to himself until later in the New Year. For now, he couldn't bear the thought of spoiling her joy. She was so happy. He also didn't want to ruin the Christmas celebrations for the entire family. There was nothing to be gained by divulging the name right away. But soon, he would have to tell her.

Tell her that her father wanted him dead.

He had asked his brothers not to bring up the kidnappers, or the wealthy man who sent them, again until he did, saying he wanted them all to focus on enjoying the holiday. They'd all readily agreed, but William said he wanted to discuss the matter further before he returned to Boonesborough.

That morning, Sam took a ride to have a moment alone to think. After giving the matter some thought, he decided Forbes must be desperate to have Catherine back in Boston. If he had her husband killed, she would have no reason to stay in Kentucky. When Forbes or his lawyers were researching the mountain's ownership records, he must have discovered Sam's name and recognized it from Catherine's letters. She had sent several letters to her father after they'd married and told him that she now lived in Kentucky and was exceedingly happy, but he never replied back. She received only a short terse note from her mother saying Catherine should return home and have her marriage to Sam annulled.

It disappointed Catherine greatly. She concluded that her father must be angry with her for marrying without his permission. And for marrying a man without means. In Boston high society, heiresses married heirs. Marriages served as a means to economic advancement.

If Forbes could get the deed, he could potentially make a fortune on the mountain's gold himself and keep Sam from becoming a wealthy man. But why would Forbes want to do that?

Then he knew.

If the man got his daughter back, he could get his hands on the sizable inheritance she received from her maternal grandfather, including her large estate in England. Sam had never been there, but the description of Brympton House sounded nothing short of spectacular. The estate was also highly productive and yielded a sizable annual income.

He took a deep steadying breath and turned his horse back toward the house. But the fresh pine and cedar scented air did little to settle his unease. If his conclusions were correct, he would have to set Forbes straight, once and for all. Threats to his family had to be met with serious ramifications. There was nothing to stop Forbes from sending more men. The man could not be ignored. The next time, someone Sam loved might be hurt or killed.

He would have to travel to Boston. If Forbes wanted a fight, he would give him one.

But he refused to leave Catherine and the babe and he couldn't expect them to travel for some months. Perhaps by late spring or early summer they would both be strong enough to make the journey.

Furthermore, he needed to determine for himself just how much gold his mountain held.

Perhaps he would ask Bear and Artis to come with them. It would be safer to have Bear along. It would also be a lot more amusing. And Artis could help Catherine with the babe. Or perhaps he should just have Mrs. Wrigley accompany them. He had plenty of time to decide.

Until then, he resolved to be even more vigilant than normal.



"Are you ready to race me?" Stephen yelled to him as Sam returned and rode Alex up to the barn.

"Absolutely. Warm your stallion up. I'll put Alex up and get my new stallion saddled," Sam replied.

After a few laps in the round pen to warm up the two huge stallions, he and Stephen took their horses to the start of the trail that led away from Cumberland Falls Horse Farm.

He glanced over at his youngest brother. Stephen's eager competitiveness lit up his face and his black horse gleamed in the late morning light. Sam admired the horse's fine proportions, muscular

build, deep chest, short back, and strong haunches. George would be tough to beat even though Sam was riding his best stallion, an exceptionally tall young gray he'd purchased earlier in the year.

Bear and William watched from the porch.

"Try not to humiliate him, Stephen," William called. "My money's on you."

"'Tis only a wee pony Stephen rides," Bear yelled. "Sam will no doubt beat him on that tall gray. I'll wager ye a dollar, William."

"Take off on my count of three," William called. "One, two… three!"

Both horses lunged forward, their big powerful hips propelling them like cannonballs. Within a few seconds, Stephen's mount pulled well ahead of Sam's.

It made Sam glad he had previously decided not to enter the Twelfth Day Race. And from the looks of it, Stephen stood a good chance of winning.

Sam finally slowed when continuing would have been just too humiliating.

Stephen slowed too and turned back toward him. "Had enough?" he called.

"You were already halfway to town," Sam said. "Looks like you've got yourself a winner there. And Bear lost a dollar."

"He'll likely lose at least another when he bets on Artis' horse at the race," Stephen predicted, smiling broadly.



Except for a few short naps for herself and the babe, Catherine kept Rory in her arms nearly all week. The 'oohs' and 'ahhs' from the other women and Martha and Polly, kept the babe and herself entertained. After pleading for their help, Jane and Kelly had agreed to make clothes for the babe over the last few days. During the week, from time to time, Artis joined the men to train George and Glasgow for the upcoming race. In between, she continued her cooking lessons with Mrs. Wrigley.

Looking proud of herself, Artis brought in and sat down a tray of

the apple turnovers she'd just made. "Look, Rory smiled!" she said, pointing.

"You're right, Artis. He did!" Catherine exclaimed.

The other two women just laughed.

"What's so funny?" Catherine asked Jane.

"Babes can't actually smile until they're around a month old," Jane answered. "In newborns, it likely means he just farted."

Catherine grinned. Jane was always outspoken and often blunt.

"Well, he's certainly taking after his Uncle William, more and more," Kelly said, causing them all to erupt in hilarity.

"It looked like a genuine smile to me," Catherine protested. "I'm going to go ask Doc if what Jane said is true. We need more tea anyway to go with those delicious looking pastries." She stood and handed Rory to Artis.

"Why me?" Artis said, dusting flour off her apron and then taking the babe a bit awkwardly.

"Because you need the experience. Kelly and Jane have already had babies," Catherine told her, as she picked up the teapot and started to leave. "And based on how Bear's been acting lately, yours are not far off."

Again the women all erupted in hysterics and Artis' face colored fiercely.

The sound of their laughter must have covered the noise of her steps because when she went into the kitchen, she found her cook in Doc's arms. His lips seemed to be conducting a rather thorough examination of Mrs. Wrigley's mouth.

She paused for a second trying to decide whether to back up or clear her throat. Amused, she decided to clear her throat.

Rory took a step back at once and Mrs. Wrigley blushed furiously before she spoke, admitting the truth graciously. "I'm sorry Mrs. Wyllie. It will not happen again. But Dr. McGuffin and I have grown *fond* of each other."

"That's marvelous," Catherine said, trying to make light of the

awkward moment. She put some tea in the teapot.

“Please don’t think Mrs. Wrigley was acting inappropriately,” Doc said. “It was my fault and I apologize to both of you. I just couldn’t resist this sweet woman any longer. So I kissed her. Not the other way around.”

“There’s no sense in your apologizing to me. I willingly did it and I thought I managed to kiss you back quite well,” Mrs. Wrigley protested.

“That you did,” he admitted with a smile.

“Look, there’s no reason for either of you to apologize to me. You are a widow and a widower who have found each other’s company enjoyable. I will not judge you,” she said. “I’m happy for you.”

“Will you tell Mr. Wyllie?” the cook asked, looking worried. “I don’t want to lose my job. I love working for you two. You’ve become like family to me.”

“We feel the same. I will leave telling Sam to you two, when you are ready,” Catherine replied. “I would only ask that you refrain from further displays of affections in front of the children, since you are not married.”

“Of course,” they both said at once.

“Now, if you would be so kind as to pour some hot water in the teapot Mrs. Wrigley, I need to ask the good doctor’s professional opinion on a serious matter.”

“What might that be?” Rory asked, looking concerned.

“Baby smiles and farting,” she laughed.

Chapter 35

3 January, 1800

Sam failed to convince Artis not to race her horse. She insisted that Glasgow would stand a better chance at winning with her riding him. Bear was too large a man for the horse to carry in a race and only she knew how to get the most out of Glasgow.

Bear was of no help in the argument. He just stood by, arms crossed in front of him with a look of faint amusement on his face. When the determined look in her eye made Sam realize it was pointless to argue further, he gave up. Something he didn't do often.

After considerable discussing, debating, and weighing out, the family decided that all of the children should stay with Catherine, Jane, and Doc while Sam, his three brothers, and Artis and Kelly would go to the Twelfth Day Race. With ice hanging from the roof's edges, they all agreed it was too cold for children, particularly an infant to travel. And mounted on horses instead of riding in wagons, the adults could make the journey there and back much faster.

At first, Sam had refused to leave Catherine and the babe, and he still regretted that he'd allowed her to talk him into going. But when he realized that going to Harrodsburg would give him a chance to personally question Dixon, he decided it might be a good idea after all.

He went upstairs to say goodbye to Little John. His son didn't even protest when he told him the children would not be able to go. He didn't want to leave Happy anyway, he said. He and the pup were now inseparable.

Earlier, Artis had asked Martha and Polly to look after her pup, which she'd named Stirling, and they joyfully promised to do so. As Sam watched the children play with the black bundles of energy, he would swear the puppies grew a couple of inches taller over the last week.

He gave each of the children a quick hug and then hurried back

downstairs.

He found Catherine in their bedroom feeding Rory. The sight still brought him joy. Sitting there with their son in her arms, the sun streaming in through the window behind her, she looked so lovely it took away his breath. And a glimpse of her full breast as she changed the babe to her other side made his heart beat more rapidly.

He still found it hard to believe he'd been blessed so richly. His whole world seemed brighter, fuller, and happier. He'd never known such contentment.

"Good morning again, my treasure," he told her, walking up to her side and brushing a gentle kiss across her forehead. He breathed in her fresh soft scent, like drops of rainwater on roses.

"Good morning again, to you," she responded.

"I just told Little John goodbye. He's happy staying here with his pup." He walked over and stroked the top of Rory's head. "I don't know which is growing faster, our babe or the puppies," he told her. "Rory seems to be thriving on your mother's milk."

"Definitely," Catherine said. "Just look at the size of his feet."

"I'm going to miss you," he said taking her soft hand in his. "Truthfully, I don't want to go without you."

"Please Sam, go. You've worked so hard over the last two years building this house and then setting up our horse farm. You've earned a break. Enjoy your brothers' company and the festivities. We will all be fine. There's no need for you to worry. Rory will be here and Jane is such a good shot."

"Yes, she is. But keep the doors barred and your weapons loaded."

"We will. And just so you have something to look forward to," she said impishly, "I'll be all healed up by the time you get back." The smoldering flame he saw in her eyes startled him.

Already aching for her, his body reacted instantly. "I will be back at the earliest possible moment, I assure you."

She cleared her throat, pretending not to be affected by the hungry look he gave her.

“And Sam?”

“Yes?”

“Stand behind Artis. She’s been through so much. Just think what it would mean to her to win the race. She has the right to have a shot at winning. Man or woman, we all need to experience victory in our lives.”

Sam considered what she said for a moment. “You’re right, of course. I just hope one of them, Stephen or Artis, can be victorious. I don’t care which because I want both of them to win. And I want them and their stallions to run the race safely.”

“Me too,” she agreed. “Stay safe yourself, Sam. I love you so much.”

“And I’ll love you forever.”

He bent to kiss her, reveling in the velvet softness of her full lips and the feel of her silky hair in his hand.

Then he picked up his already packed bag, and took in the glorious sight of her and the babe one last time before leaving. Again, he was struck by her beauty. He committed Catherine’s stunning image to memory. Picturing her in his mind would warm him on his cold journey.



Even well-mounted, the ride to Harrodsburg would still take a day and a half. But without the wagons, they were able to take the more direct bridle path, a route that did not allow the passage of a wheeled conveyance.

They stopped mid-way at a hamlet to let the horses rest overnight. Fortunately the modest inn there had one room still available, which they all shared after eating an equally modest meal. They gave the tiny beds to Artis and Kelly, while the men slept on pallets. Midway through the night, Sam decided he would rather be sleeping on the snow on a bed of pine boughs than on the hard wood plank floor listening to Bear snore. But it was too late to do anything about it.

As they neared Harrodsburg, Sam thought about the fact that this was once highly dangerous ground. The early pioneer farmers, who settled the area nearly twenty-five years earlier, kept two tools close

at hand—a hoe and a rifle. Even so, along with the sweat of their brows, the lifeblood of many of them drained into their freshly hoed soil.

But if there was a place worth fighting for, it was Kentucky.

Still surrounded by vast forests, only navigable by ancient Indian paths, Harrodsburg was a bustling frontier community that grew around the now larger fort built on Old Fort Hill.

Upon arrival, they were forced to pay an exorbitant price, but they secured three rooms at the Dunn Inn—one for Bear and Artis, one for William and Kelly, and another for Stephen and him with two undersized beds that nearly filled the small room. At least it was clean and relatively warm.

Tonight, at the tavern next door, they were all enjoying a meal and several pints to quench their thirst. As Sam ate a savory stew, the warm food felt good against his cold lips. He could smell chickens roasting in the tavern's ovens and decided he would order one of those too. A single bowl of stew was not likely to fill his long-empty stomach. And the delectable aroma of pumpkin pie wafting from the tavern's kitchen made him decide to order a whole pie for the table. Bear would not let any of it go to waste.

The large crowded tavern, constructed of sturdy oaken timbers and walls filled with mud mixed with straw and sticks, thankfully felt cozy and warm after two days of riding in the open winter air.

People attending the Twelfth Day festivities and race from all over Kentucky swarmed around the packed room. They soon met a hale and hearty old gentleman named Duncan Browne. William invited him to join them at their table. The most sociable member of the family, William had a habit of befriending interesting strangers, particularly in taverns.

And this old man was definitely proving to be an interesting and perhaps imaginative storyteller. Browne told them of the time he had fought ten hours single-handedly against twenty attacking Indians, shooting them down, one by one. After that, he collected the best bow from among the dead Indians and a year's supply of arrows for hunting. Another time, he had been charged by a herd of buffalo and only managed to save himself by springing on the back of one and staying on it until the herd slowed. Then he leapt off and shot the beast for food and its warm skin.

On another occasion, Browne claimed to have acquired his now deceased wife by winning a shooting contest. “She had a beautiful face, but it was the beautiful soul back of that I cared about,” Browne said wistfully.

Sam studied his ale and then took a long sip. That description of Browne’s wife reminded Sam very much of how he felt about Catherine.

Now, they listened as the old man reminiscenced about Fort Harrod’s founder. Sam noted that the wrinkles of his face looked deep in the light of the tavern’s oil lamps. He suspected a lifetime of hardships and wilderness experiences earned Browne each and every line on his proud face.

“In the winter of 1792, looking for beaver, Harrod made one of his many journeys exploring the area,” the old man said. “He never returned.”

“What happened to the poor man?” Artis asked.

“His disappearance remains an appalling mystery. Indians may have killed him,” he said. “Some think he decided to leave his wife for reasons unknown. Around here, we call that a wilderness divorce.”

“Nay,” Artis said. “From what ye’ve said, he seems like too good a man to leave his wife stranded in the middle of the wilderness.”

“Oh, she wasn’t stranded. He was a wealthy farmer, owning more than 20,000 acres,” Browne explained.

“I heard he was murdered by one of his companions while secretly searching for a fabled silver mine,” Stephen said.

“Aye, I’ve heard that rumor as well,” the old man said.

“Are ye from Scotland?” Bear asked him.

“I was born there. But lived here most of my life,” Browne said. “I still retain a wee bit of the Scots’ ways.”

“Well then, I insist on buying a fellow Scot a wee droppy,” Bear said, motioning for the tavern maid.

After Bear ordered one for all of them, Sam said, “Regardless of how he died, Harrod’s legacy will live on in the town that he bravely founded.”

“Agreed!” Browne said.

When the whiskey arrived, Bear held his glass high. “To my beautiful bride Artis, the soon to be winner of the race.”

“I’ll drink to that with one caveat,” Stephen declared. “That she will be the winner of the second place prize.”

“Mrs. MacKay, *you’re* not planning to ride in the race are you?” Browne asked, his voice rising in surprise.

“Indeed I am, Sir,” she answered, her green eyes flashing.

Browne raised his bushy gray brows. “If they let you, which I doubt, that will be a first,” he said laughing and taking a small sip.

“Who are they?” Bear asked. “Are they in here?”

“Aye, ‘tis that short man over there, already dressed like he’s goin’ to the ball,” Browne said. “He’s been put in charge of the race. And the men around him are on his racing committee.”

Bear pushed away from the table. “What’s his name?”

“Elijah Thornbird,” Browne replied.

“Now Bear,” Sam said, “if he says no, try not to hurt him.”

“Aye, I’ll na hurt the man,” Bear said. “Unless he’s unreasonable.”

Artis stood and quickly caught up to Bear whose long strides already carried him halfway across the room. The crowd seemed to part as Bear strode forward, his sheer size and weapon-covered body intimidating them all.

Sam couldn’t resist, he followed the two.

“Mr. Thornbird?” Bear said to the man’s back.

Thornbird turned and his eyes stared into Bear’s massive chest. His gaze drifted upwards, taking in Bear’s powerful build. Then he asked, “And whom might you be, Sir.”

Bear towered over the man by a full ten inches, which forced his brother to lower his gaze to look Thornbird in the eye. Bear’s shadow of a beard gave him an even more threatening appearance than normal. “Sir, I am Bear MacKay and this is my wife, Artis, and my brother, Captain Sam Wyllie. I would have a word with ye.”

“It is my great pleasure to meet the three of you,” Thornbird replied.

“I understand ye are in charge of the race?” Bear asked.

“Indeed I am, Sir.” Thornbird said and dusted off his waistcoat as though he’d gotten dusty just standing next to Bear.

Sam could tell the man took excessive pride in his appearance.

“What are the requirements for racers?” Bear asked.

“Your meaning eludes me,” Thornbird said, raising his dark brows. “You simply pay the entry fee.”

“I will endeavor to make myself clear,” Bear said. “My wife and I plan to enter our horse in the race tomorrow.”

“Excellent. I wish you the best of luck. Now if you will excuse me, I should get back to my friends. We are ironing out a few last minute details for the race.”

“My wife will be ridin’ our horse,” Bear said.

After his gasp of surprise, intense astonishment filled Thornbird’s face. For a moment, he merely stared, mouth open and tongue-tied. Then he said, “But that’s impossible!”

“Why?” Artis asked.

“Because it’s never been done,” he replied as though that settled the matter. “You’re a woman!”

“Nevertheless, we intend for her to ride the horse,” Sam said, adding his voice of authority to the discussion. “’Never been done’ does not mean never will be done.”

Artis peered up at his face and smiled, apparently thankful for Sam’s support.

“Aye,” Bear said. “I assure ye my wife is a fine equestrian and knows her horse well. Her stallion is well-trained and comes from a Virginia plantation. He has excellent breedin’ and a fine pedigree.”

“Aye, he’s a descent of Bulle Rock,” Artis said proudly. “And I trained him.”

The man’s face registered recognition of the well-known name of

the first thoroughbred horse imported, by a Virginia plantation owner, into the American Colonies. Thornbird was momentarily speechless in his surprise and then stammered. “But…but. We cannot allow it!”

Thornbird’s racing committee now stood by listening to the argument.

“The idea is preposterous!” one of them declared.

“Simply laughable,” another one said. “She couldn’t possibly win.”

Artis’ eyes conveyed the fury within her and Bear’s face was now a glowering mask of barely controlled rage.

“Yer all a bunch of bloody blowhards—all mouth and no brains,” Bear snarled.

Sam needed to deflate the situation and soon or Bear might do something they would all regret. “Do you have written rules for your race,” he asked Thornbird.

“We do,” the man said.

“And does it specifically state in the rules that a woman may not ride in the race?” Sam questioned.

“Well…no…the issue never arose. Nevertheless, it’s forbidden. The idea is absurd. Nothing short of scandalous,” Thornbird said. “The sport is only for gentlemen.”

“What would be scandalous is denyin’ a superb rider and horse entry into the match,” Bear shouted.

“Without a rule specifically banning a woman rider, you cannot deny her entry into the race,” Sam said firmly.

During the last few minutes, curious spectators, including William, Kelly, and Stephen, gathered around them.

“Let her race!” one man called.

A rather bawdy looking woman called out in a sultry voice, “A talented woman can ride man or horse equally well!”

After the laughter died down, another one shouted, “Give her a chance!”

“The lovely lady will at least make the race delightful to watch,” another said.

Bear shot that man a look of warning, then turned back to Thornbird. “Will ye let my wife ride?” Bear demanded.

Thornbird appeared apprehensive but stood his ground and shook his balding head. “No. She could be injured or killed. After all, she’s just a woman!” He thrust his pointed chin out in defiance.

“Enough of yer ignorant mouth, ye idjit!” Artis swore. She hauled her right fist back and with a lightning fast motion slammed it into the man’s jaw.

Thornbird’s head whipped back and he staggered a bit, but he remained standing.

After Sam got over his own shock, he glanced around. The disbelief on everyone’s faces lasted for only a moment before every last one of them erupted in laughter, especially Bear and William.

When they all settled down again, dozens shouted at Thornbird demanding that he let her race.

With a long sigh and rubbing his chin, Thornbird begrudgingly relented. He looked at Bear, not Artis, and warned, “All right, but when she falls, her death will be on your hands, not mine.”

Bear moved closer to Thornbird, thrust his head forward, and through clenched teeth swore, “She’s na goin’ to fall.”

Thornbird quickly looked away and turned to Artis. “Be mounted and ready on the race grounds by ten in the morning,” he said. “What’s your horse’s name?”

“Glasgow,” she said squaring her shoulders. “He’s a handsome tall black with a small star between his eyes.”

“To Glasgow!” several men toasted as they turned back to their seats.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Thornbird groaned.

“I thank ye,” Artis said, satisfaction showing in her eyes. “And I would advise ye to never refer to a woman as *‘just’* in the future.”

Chapter 36

Harrodsburg, Twelfth Day Celebration, 5 January 1800

That next morning the entire population of the town, men, women and children, all prepared to leave soon for the scene of the great riding match. The race would take place on a picturesque spot of prairie about a quarter mile west of the fort.

Sam decided he would wait until after the race to see Dixon at the jail. He didn't want to spoil the festive morning. There would be time enough to question Dixon later.

As they all set off for the large livery, the sounds of horses' hooves and wagon wheels prodding through the snow and the dampness of the morning filled the air. Sam looked to the sky, hoping rain or snow would hold off until after the race was over. Both would make the race far more hazardous.

And it was already dangerous enough. Thankfully, Artis rode a standard saddle. Bear said she always did, because she thought sidesaddles were for women who were more interested in being lady-like rather than really riding. Sam had to agree. A good rider became a part of the horse, largely by feeling a steed's movements in his or her legs.

Sam watched gaily dressed women and men strut all around the town. Mounted militia, dressed much like him in buckskin hunting shirts, leggings, and hats, carried pistols and long knives stuck in their belts. Other men galloped hither and yon trying to avoid the crowd or prepared themselves for the exciting contest by visiting the town's taverns.

For the race, Artis wore a fresh green and gold-trimmed riding habit that Catherine had given her. On her jacket's lapel, she had pinned her Luckenbooth brooch, a gift from Bear when he asked her to marry him. The gems in the traditional Scottish symbol of love and loyalty, sparkled in the sun that finally decided to show itself. Sam suspected the gold gloves she wore covered the sore knuckles she

must have from slugging Thornbird. Her long hair, clasped at the back of her neck with a sturdy silver clip, hung down her back. She appeared confident, but Sam wondered if she was also anxious because she kept chewing on her lower lip.

Stephen wore a dark blue jacket with pewter buttons and wisely chose a black shirt and black breeches. Only his cravat was white. The shirt and pants would likely be filthy by the time the race was over. His youngest brother appeared as confident as Artis, his face reflecting his steadfast determination to win.

"Kentuckians love horse racing," William explained to Artis and Kelly as they made their way toward the livery. "Matches are raucous, rowdy, and centered on wagering on favorite riders."

"What do they wager?" Kelly asked.

"Money, tobacco, property," he answered. "Some even wager slaves."

"That's horrible!" Artis said. "Gambling people's lives is barbaric."

"I agree," Sam said. "The practice should be outlawed. Along with slavery and forced indenture."

"'Tis one thing to indenture willingly to repay a debt or receive freedom dues, and another to be forced," Artis said. "But both deprive a person of years of their life."

Her voice sounded distant and Sam regretted bringing up the subject.

"I've heard some men are wagering a fortune," William said, bringing them all back to a lighter subject.

"Is anyone wagerin' coin on me?" Artis asked. She almost sounded hopeful.

"I am," Bear said proudly. "But I will na say how much."

"I'm not saying either," William said. "Perhaps I'll wager on both Artis and Stephen. Just to avoid favoritism mind you."

"Place a healthy bet for me on Artis," Kelly told William. "No offense, Stephen, but I have to support another woman."

That didn't surprise Sam. Kelly and Artis were as close as sisters.

"You'd all be better off not betting anything," Stephen said. "Gambling is a fool's game and yields a fool's reward."

Despite Stephen's protests, William and Bear stopped at a betting table. Sam and a grumbling Stephen waited nearby with Artis and Kelly.

"How about ye, Sam?" Bear asked while standing in line to place his wager. "Are ye na goin' to place a wager?"

"No, I'm inclined to agree with Stephen. I'll save what I would have wagered and use it to buy a celebratory meal for all of us after the race."

"Ye think one of them is goin' to win then?" Bear asked.

"I do," he answered. "I've seen Stephen's stallion run full out, and it was indeed impressive. And I know what kind of sire, George had and if he's anything like the first George, Stephen will be hard to beat. That horse had heart."

"He was smart too," William said. "And courageous."

Stephen dropped his lashes quickly to hide his hurt. His brother still grieved for his favorite horse. Perhaps if this George could win the race, it would ease some of Stephen's sorrow.

Sam turned to Artis. "I haven't seen Glasgow run yet, but I'm looking forward to seeing what he can do. Based on his conformation and what Bear tells me of your skill as a rider, I'd say you and Glasgow stand a good chance of winning too."

Next to the livery, under a sprawling oak tree, they passed the town's smithy. Like most blacksmiths, he was a powerful man with large hands and thick brawny arms. His brow already dripped with sweat despite the chilly temperature. Besides the staff at the busy taverns and inns, the smithy appeared to be the only one in town working this morning.

As they passed, the smithy looked Sam in the eye and nodded politely before he swung his sledge hammer and they heard the clang of a mighty blow.

"Good morning!" William called out brightly to the smithy.

The burly man waved back and went on with his work.

As they entered the enormous livery, Sam inhaled the barn's familiar scent—the grassy smell of fresh horse droppings, old seasoned wood, salt on the horses' coats, leather, hay, and oats—all combined to create an earthy smell Sam loved.

Excitement filled the livery as the six of them grabbed their saddles and tack. Each saddle hung on a rack in front of the stall door of their mounts. Within a few minutes, they finished and each held the reins of their horses.

Before Artis mounted, William insisted on checking her saddle leathers. "You never know what some small-minded person might do to keep a woman from racing," he said. After a moment, he told them, "Sure enough, someone's cut the girth strap half-way through."

Sam and the others took a close look. The cut was smooth, as though someone used a knife to slash it. It was cut just enough to cause it to split under the stress of a race.

"Bloody hell!" Bear swore. "She could have taken a terrible tumble. Maybe even broke her neck or been trampled." He looked like he wanted to trample someone himself.

Angry too, Sam would have helped him if they'd known who ought to be trampled.

"That's what makes you a good sheriff," Stephen said, double checking his leathers. "You're always a step ahead of criminals."

The rest of them carefully examined their own leathers as well, and William double-checked Kelly's saddle, but only Artis' had been tampered with.

It took another few minutes to obtain a new girth strap from the apologetic livery owner. "I have no idea why someone would do such a terrible thing. Or when they did it!" he said, when William questioned the man. "They must be worried that Mrs. MacKay is going to win. And I hope you do! I wish you the best of luck," he told her. "That's some horse. I'm going to go place a wager on you right now!" With that he strode off toward the betting table.

By the time they made their way to the race grounds, and paid their entry fees, the crowd there was already swarming. The eager spectators were arriving early to secure a good spot to view the race.

Sam saw several horses and riders form up in a line, waiting to ride their mounts to the starting point. He studied the other horses in the race and realized Stephen and Artis would have some tough competition. For the most part, the mounts all appeared to be bred for strength and fleetness—the prime requisites for a fine thoroughbred.

There were also a few other horses who, in his opinion, didn't stand a chance or belong in the race. Their legs were too short and their muscles undefined. A rider of one of those horses seemed to be intoxicated. He must have spent the morning getting tanked-up to bolster his courage.

"What a bloody fool," Stephen said disapprovingly. "Hope the judges take him out of the race. He could cause one of these fine horses to stumble or fall."

Sam agreed, but he was more concerned about Artis. Like Stephen's horse, her stallion was a big, bright black, sixteen hands high, and very strongly made. He had a small head, broad forehead with a white star in the center, delicate ears, and a black mane and tail. His big eyes were intelligent and held a sheen of purpose. Hopefully, the big fellow would keep her safe.

Artis looked stunning sitting atop such a magnificent animal. She leaned down and stroked Glasgow's neck. Her horse appeared calm, as though he understood exactly what he was about to do.

George, however, was acting a little high-headed. The stallion wasn't used to all the noise and crowds. And he'd only been raced a dozen times or so over the last week at Sam's place, and then only against three different horses. He won easily every time. They decided, however, not to race him against Glasgow, concerned that the stallion might feel beaten down or be demoralized if he didn't win. George needed to feel like he was the dominant horse.

When George pinned his ears back, a sign of uneasiness, Stephen quickly dismounted and spoke softly to him. In a soothing voice, he said, "You're a good fellow. The best horse here. Let's show them what you're made of." At once, George seemed to calm and after Stephen stroked his long neck a few more times, his brother remounted and took the stallion off a little ways. Then Stephen loped him slowly in a tight circle several times. Artis did the same, following behind Stephen. They reversed direction and George followed Glasgow. Then they switched direction again. As soon as the horses were warmed up, they proceeded toward the line of waiting race horses. Sam, Bear,

William, and Kelly followed slightly behind them.

When Artis and Glasgow made an appearance, the crowd began to react. Word of a woman riding in the race must have flared across the town like summer lightning. Some men were up in arms that a woman would be riding.

One heckler yelled, "'Go back to the kitchen and cook dinner."

Another booed her as she rode by.

"Easy Bear," Sam cautioned, as Bear started to react. "Ignore him."

Bear snarled at the man, but continued on with them.

"Don't worry," Stephen told Artis. "You'll show them."

There were a few other hecklers, but the vast majority of the spectators, especially the women, cheered her on as she made her way toward the line of other riders.

After a father pointed Artis out to his two daughters, the little girls clapped their hands and called out. "Win the race Glasgow!"

When they reached the spot where Artis and Stephen would join the other racers, Bear told her, "Good luck, my angel. And may Glasgow give ye the wings ye lack."

"God's speed to both of you," Sam said.

"Thank you," Stephen said and then he handed Sam his wool coat. "Hold this for me, will you? I don't want to get it dirty."

"I'll stay clean, because Glasgow will be out in front," Artis quipped.

They all chuckled. A flash of humor even crossed Stephen's face.

Artis motioned Bear over to her and handed him her Luckenbooth brooch and silver hair clasp. "Guard these for me, husband. I wouldn't want them to fall off during the race." She gave him a kiss and then straightened her back and shook her head, letting her long locks fall across her shoulders.

"Both of you, win hands down!" William told them.

"We're proud of you both," Kelly said.

Artis smiled broadly at Bear and then at the rest of their family, even Stephen. Sam knew she was living a dream and based on her sparkling eyes, she was filled with excitement and expectation.

Stephen appeared more resolute than excited. Sam could see his brother's strong will in the firm set of his jaw and his eyes gleamed with single-minded determination. When Stephen set his mind on something there was no stopping him.

Soon snare drums beat and trumpets blared to signal that the race would begin in fifteen minutes. Artis and Stephen turned their horses toward the other racers and took their places in line.

The one-mile race would be run on a straight course marked at the end by upright stakes, where the race judges waited. Men also stood at the starting line with brightly colored flags, ready to signal the match's start. The judges at the starting line, thankfully, did take the drunk rider out of the race as well as another horse that appeared to have gone lame. That left thirteen horses in the race.

"I think Bear and I should ride down to where the judges are standing," Sam said. "I want to be sure this race is judged fairly."

"Kelly and I will find a spot at about the half-mile mark," William said. "That way one of us will be able to see the whole race."

"Sounds like a plan," Sam said. "Meet us at the finish line when it's all over."

The four of them galloped to the half-mile mark and he and Bear continued on to the end. Sam caught the eye of Thornbird and nodded at him. He wanted the man to realize he and Bear were there.

Thornbird rolled his eyes and turned his back on Sam.

Sitting atop his horse, Sam had a perfect view of the finish line. Although the view was unobstructed and his eyesight keen, he struggled to pick out Artis and Stephen from among the racers. Perhaps he'd been able to see them better when their horses pulled ahead.



After some preliminaries involving the local elected officials, the space selected for the riding was cleared of all noncontestants. The riders and horses lined up to start. A judge told them that at the sound of the fife, he would signal the start.

Artis' heart began racing before she did. Her mouth went dry and she was suddenly breathless. She could feel Glasgow tense beneath her, ready to run.

The high shrill sound of a fife rang out and the judge waved a green flag downward.

They were off.

Her heart continued to hammer within her chest as Glasgow's long legs shot forward. Only a few seconds later she pulled about half a length ahead of the other horses. Girding herself with determination, she ignored the other riders and kept her eyes on the finish line. It seemed a long way off.

But she would not falter.

She would not fail.

She would not fall.

She made sure her heels were pushed down, feeling the stretch in her calves and the pressure on her feet. She let her hips match the waves of the horse's motion, helping them move as one. Her sense of the horse's mind and movements heightened. Yet the world beyond Glasgow, and the other horses just behind her, blurred and appeared dreamlike.

Positioned in about the middle of the group of racers, the thunderous sound of the pummeling horses' hooves roared in her ears. The deafening sound obscured the cheers of the boisterous onlookers. At the starting line, she had recognized two well-known Virginia stallions in the race—Messenger and Diamond—and they both threatened her position. She leaned forward on Glasgow, her arms moving in the same pattern as the beat of his legs, helping him to run smoothly.

She flew over the pasture at a blazing clip, feeling exhilarated and free. As she tore through the air, wind rasped against her cheeks, the cold stung her eyes, and the jarring lunges whacked every muscle and battered every bone in her body. Over and over.

But she loved it. Because her lips were clamped tight, she laughed inside, enjoying the sensation of the horse's strength. It became her power too. As if they shared one heart. One mind. One goal.

As she continued to hold the lead, she grew hopeful that she might be successful after all. She wasn't riding for the purse. And she wasn't riding to prove to everyone that a woman could win. That was a given in her mind and in Bear's. She didn't care what anyone else thought. She was riding to let Glasgow prove himself—to give him a chance to be a champion horse. If she won, it would be his win and she would merely share it.

This was Glasgow's chance to chase greatness.

Then the corner of her eye caught another rider pulling up on her right, riding a horse unknown to her. He grabbed for the back of her saddle blanket and she felt a sharp pain in the back of her right ankle when he used his boot to knock her foot out of the iron.

Furious, but staying focused on the race, she pressed Glasgow to that side, pushing the rider out of the way. The rider faltered and it made his white thoroughbred waver and then stumble. Recovering, she urged Glasgow to an even faster run, leaving the unscrupulous racer behind her.

She would not let the brute slow her down. She pressed her stallion onward. But she struggled to get her boot back in the bouncing stirrup and, several times, she felt her bottom rise in the saddle. A fall at this speed would be grievous, perhaps tragic. She concentrated on her foot, and willed it to slip firmly into the iron. When it did, her heart leapt with relief.

But her relief was short lived. She sensed the presence of another rider coming up from her other side. She could hear the snorts of his winded horse he was so close.

She leaned even further down on Glasgow's neck, her forehead nearly touching his flowing black mane. "Run, Glasgow, run!" she yelled. "Harder! Faster! Fly!"

And he did. Faster than he ever ran before. It felt like they were flying. She received her wings after all. She hoped Bear could see her now.

A sense of strength and an indefinable feeling of control she'd never known in the past filled her. She could feel the wind splaying through her hair. Her body vibrated with excitement. The reins seemed almost alive. She sensed a surreal energy flowing through each leather, linking her inextricably with her horse.

Just when her confidence in winning spiraled upward, another rider's horse drew even with Glasgow. She wondered who the rider was, but out of the corner of her eye he was only a blur. She dared a glance over.

It was Stephen.

The two rode head to head, nearly in unison for some distance. George and Glasgow battled for the lead, each taking it for a second or two before the other fought a little harder and took it away again. The two stallions waged a war for dominance as she and Stephen hung on for their very lives.

She could see but not hear the crowd cheering them on. All eyes were on the two of them. The finish line drew closer.

It would be over all too soon.

As they thundered toward the finish line, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Stephen lean forward, as she was, burying his face in George's long fluttering mane.

She heard Stephen shout, coaxing George on. "Run boy! Run!"

George pulled ahead at the last instant, his will to win even stronger than Glasgow's.

She was going to lose, by less than a head's length.

But she smiled anyway.

Chapter 37

As the racers gradually slowed their speeding steeds, pulled to a stop, and then turned back, the delighted crowd roared their approval. Sam had never heard anything quite like it and he and the others joined in, cheering for Stephen and Artis.

But Bear was far from jubilant.

Other people in the crowd started throwing snowballs at the rider who had tried to unseat Artis. The judges were also cussing him out.

Sam watched as the man tried to ride away, but his poor limping horse would not move.

But that was the least of the racer's worries.

Bear rode toward the strongly built man with all the wrath of a Viking warrior seeking revenge. Bear's teeth were bared and his jaw clenched. At least he didn't have his hatchet in his hand.

"Get off that poor horse, ye bloody arse," Bear yelled as he slid Camel to a stop and leapt off his saddle.

The fellow dismounted hastily because Bear was about to pull him off his horse.

"That woman caused my horse to go lame!" he wailed.

"How dare ye try to unseat my wife, ye bloody bastard," Bear roared.

"She didn't belong in the race. She's a…." The man never got to finish his ill-advised sentence.

With one hand, Bear grabbed the rider by the neck and lifted him well into the air. Then his brother shook the fellow so hard his limbs flapped around like a rag doll. When Bear finished shaking him, he lowered him, dragged him to a nearby barrel, and hammered the man's head against the wood.

Eyes bulging and head bleeding, he grabbed at his throat, trying unsuccessfully to pry Bear's hand away.

Bear released his death grip, straightened, and with fists clenched at his sides, waited for the man to stand. "Get up!"

The fellow sucked in some much needed air and then used the barrel to help him to stand. He should have stayed down. Bear's fist struck him so hard he went flying into a sizable patch of mud and slush, his nose probably broken.

Sam just watched from atop his horse, enjoying this along with the laughing crowd.

Bear stood snarling over the rider for a minute, his glowering eyes boring holes in the man.

The fool was wise enough not to move. Or, more likely, he was just knocked out. Sam rode closer to see for himself. The cheating idiot was indeed out cold.

When they realized Bear could discipline the man no further, Sam said, "He's punished well enough. Let's go congratulate our winners."

"Aye, I guess ye're right," Bear said, regaining his composure a bit. "Thank God she was na hurt. If she'd fallen, I'd have killed this bloody bastard."

They both stared down at the man. Sam nodded his head in agreement. "He is indeed bloody, now. And I would concur, he is a bastard. Now, let's go!" he insisted. He wanted to leave before the man woke up and Bear's chastisement continued. Further punishment could be lethal.

Bear remounted and they made their way over to the judges.

One of the judges ushered the top three riders into a large half-circle made from old barrels. Each barrel was painted with a large letter of the town's name—HARRODSBURG.

Stephen, Artis, and the racer who rode the horse she had called Messenger all sat atop their panting mounts, grinning and waving. Messenger's rider graciously shook Stephen's hand and congratulated him, and then spoke to Artis for a moment.

The cheering and clapping crowd grew larger by the minute as

people who'd watched the race hurried toward them on foot, in wagons, and mounted on horses. As Sam watched, it looked like a stampede, but they all managed to peaceably find a place.

William and Kelly pulled their mounts alongside Sam and Bear. To Sam's surprise, his four men also joined them. They all exchanged greetings and the hands reported that they'd enjoyed their holiday. Garvin said they would be heading back to the horse farm right after the awards were presented.

When most of the people had gathered about, a horn blared to quiet everyone.

Thornbird shouted out, declaring Stephen the winner by a nose. The crowd cheered and Thornbird reached up with Stephen's winnings and a brass medal that hung from a blue ribbon. "Well done!" Thornbird said. "We'll want to learn more about your magnificent steed's breeding later today."

Stephen extended his hand and shook the man's hand before taking the match purse and medal.

Sam could practically see the herd of cows Stephen was undoubtedly picturing in his mind as he felt the weight of the pouch in his hand. Smiling, his black-clad brother sat proudly atop George, his back ram-rod straight. Stephen put the ribbon over his head and around his neck. The winner's medal fell onto his brother's broad chest. The still panting stallion's chest and legs were splattered heavily with slush and mud, much of it undoubtedly kicked up by Glasgow's hooves.

Then, Thornbird moved to stand in front of Artis and Glasgow.

Tired, the stallion's head drooped a little, but Artis held her head high. She folded her gloved hands in front of her and smiled down at the man. Even though she placed second, she looked ecstatically happy, fully alive, and filled with pride.

Sam couldn't see Thornbird's face, but the man seemed to give Artis an enthusiastic nod and then glanced over his shoulder at Sam and Bear. He nodded woodenly to them and then turned back to Artis.

"Congratulations, Mrs. MacKay. You have placed a close second in this match. You and your horse ran exceptionally well." He handed her the second place medal hanging on a red ribbon. "We apologize for the mishap that occurred because of the dishonorable rider. He is

hereby banned from future races in Harrodsburg. However, we hope you will certainly join us again."

"Aye. I would be delighted," Artis said, accepting the medal and putting the ribbon around her neck and under her wind-blown hair. The ribbon and the reddish-gold tendrils loosened on her ride framed her smiling face.

In a loud voice, Thornbird continued. "Because of that foolish man's actions, the race committee has decided to award a purse to the second place winner as well. It is not as much as we would like to give you Mrs. MacKay, but it is all we have left from the entry fees." He reached up and placed some coins in her gloved hand.

When Artis opened her palm, her eyes grew wide at the gold and silver sparkling in the sun.

Sam glanced over at Bear. His brother was watching in smug delight and grinning from one ear to the other, happy for his courageous wife. Today, Artis made history. And a memory they would all long remember.

After Thornbird congratulated the third-place winner, who received only a handshake, he made his way through the throng of well-wishers over to Sam and Bear, still sitting on their horses.

"I owe you both an apology, Sirs," he told Bear and Sam. "Mrs. MacKay is an excellent equestrian and her horse is magnificent, just as you said."

"Na apology is needed," Bear said. "But we will let ye buy us a pint at the tavern where we met ye."

"I'll be there within the half-hour," Thornbird said. "Your family's drinks are on me." With that, he marched off to join the other judges.

They all dismounted when Artis and Stephen rode over to them and got off their horses as well.

Bear gave Artis a huge hug and raised her up off the ground above his head. "Ye showed 'em what a Scots woman can do!"

"No, Bear," Kelly said. "What any woman can do, *if* she has the courage and skill that Artis displayed."

"Only if aided by a magnificent steed such as Glasgow!" Artis

declared.

Sam's men all congratulated Stephen and Artis. Stephen asked that, when they got home, they not tell Jane and the others about the race's outcome. Stephen wanted to tell Jane himself. The four men soon bid them all goodbye and left.

Stephen was still understandably buoyant. "I told you George would win!"

"Aye, ye did," Bear said. "But yer both winners as far as I'm concerned. If that idjit had not tried to slow Artis down, she may have won."

Sam smiled, agreeing that man was a fool, although the Scot's term 'idjit' seemed more apt and more suitable for some reason. But more importantly, Stephen and Artis were both winners.

"Nevertheless, I'm happy for ye too, Stephen," Bear said. He gave Stephen a congratulatory slap on the back, causing their brother to lurch forward. Bear often forgot his own strength.

"Ye deserved the win, Stephen. Congratulations! But I plan to beat ye next year," Artis challenged.

"Thank you," Stephen said. "He stealthily handed Sam the coin pouch containing his winnings and took his jacket back. Putting the coat on, he said, "Hold onto that for me will you. I would hate for someone to pickpocket me."

Sam weighed the pouch in his hand. "Feels like about fifty head of cows to me."

Chapter 38

That afternoon at the tavern, Sam counted at least a dozen requests from various men to have their mares bred by either George or Glasgow. The horse owners didn't care which. When Stephen and Bear explained that they were all leaving for home soon, each groaned with disappointment.

"How about tonight?" one persistent man asked. "I think my mare is in season."

Both Stephen and Bear declined saying their stallions had earned a good rest.

Sam and his brothers were waiting at the tavern for Artis and Kelly to join them. After hastily eating a small meal, the two women had rushed back to their rooms to get cleaned up and dressed for the ball, saying they would need at least two hours to get ready.

"I can na wait to see my Artis with her hair done up and dressed in her fancy gown again," Bear said. "Besides the gown we got married in, she never wears anything fancy. She prefers keepin' it simple. But she had one made recently. The blue one she wore on Christmas day."

"She looked lovely in it," William said, "and like Kelly, she will look like an angel."

Bear swallowed his last bite of apple pie. "Artis did look like an angel today, didn't she? She was nearly flyin' up that track on Glasgow!"

"And I'm sure you will keep her soaring over the dance floor tonight," William said. "You should have seen Bear at their wedding, Sam. He's actually a first-rate dancer."

Sam's eyebrows raised in skepticism. "Bear? A dancer?"

"Indeed," William confirmed. "He and Artis out danced them all at the Governor's wife's ball in Boonesborough."

Kentuckians loved to step all manner of dances from formal minuets to reels, country dances, and rough and tumble jigs. But without Catherine, he wasn't looking forward to attending this ball. It would be held in the militia's normally austere dining room. The tables would be cleared away and the ladies of the town would undoubtedly transform the space into a festively decorated ballroom.

Outside, the Twelfth Day celebrations continued. The festival included games, foot races, wrestling contests, horse races, and itinerant magicians. The occasion would culminate with the Twelfth Day ball early that evening. But none of it held much appeal for Sam. He was still faced with questioning Dixon and confirming that Catherine's father wanted him dead. Sam had to know why. He decided to get it over with.

After they finished eating, he told William, "Take me to the jail. It's time I questioned Dixon."

"Can't it wait until tomorrow?" William asked, draining his mug of the last drop of ale.

"No, I plan to leave at daybreak. It's a long ride home and the sooner I leave, the sooner I can be back," Sam said. "All of you can stay longer if you would like, but I want to get back to Catherine and my sons." It felt good to say sons instead of son. He hoped God would bless them with many more.

"Bear, Stephen, if I'm not back by the time she comes down, keep an eye on Kelly for me," William told them.

"Of course," Stephen said.

"Aye, she'll be well guarded," Bear answered.

"Sam, I'd also like to go back tomorrow," Stephen said. "I can't wait to tell Jane my good news."

Sam stood. "How about you two?" he asked, looking down at first William and then Bear.

"Let us talk to Kelly and Artis before we decide," William said.

"Ye always were a wise man!" Bear said, and took a long swallow of his ale.

Sam left with William who led him to the jail, located in one of the fort's four blockhouses. It took Sam's eyes a moment to adjust to

the dim light after they entered the sheriff's windowless office. A small oil lamp on the sheriff's desk was the only source of light.

"Sheriff Wyllie!" the man said, standing. "I was hoping you would stop by after the race. Congratulations to your brother on his win."

"Thank you, Sheriff Dunn," William said. "This is my older brother Captain Sam Wyllie."

"It is an honor to meet you, Captain," Dunn said, extending his hand. "William has told me of your wartime heroics."

"William talks too much," Sam said, giving his brother a side-long glance, and gripping the sheriff's rough hand. "Are you any relation to the Dunn at the inn?"

"Yes, he's my older brother," the sheriff answered.

"I am here to question Mr. Dixon, one of your prisoners," Sam told him.

"I figured as much. He's here, impatiently awaiting his day in court next week," Dunn said. "I'll take you to his cell. Do you want me to keep a record of his answers, as I did for Sheriff Wyllie?"

"No, that won't be necessary," Sam answered.

"Do you want to speak to Crowell as well?" Dunn asked. "He's on the other side of the jail. I'm keeping them separated to keep Dixon from influencing Crowell."

"That's a good idea," William said.

"No, I just need to speak to Dixon," Sam said. "Crowell just does whatever Dixon says. Let's get this over with."

"I can take him to Dixon," William volunteered.

"All right. I'll get back to my paperwork then," Dunn said.

"I know what that's like," William said sympathetically.

Dunn turned back to them. "Dixon's feet are in shackles, but his hands are free. He smelled so atrocious, I had to give him a couple buckets of water and some soap to wash with. I gave him some of my brother's old clothes too. They're about the same size. When he

finished, my deputy put the shackles back on his ankles while I stood guard."

"He was pretty rank when I left him here," William agreed. "But be careful, Dixon is as slick as egg whites. He already escaped once."

Dunn nodded his head in agreement. "After I learned what he did to your family, I wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire."

Sam had to agree.

When he set eyes on Dixon again, they stared at each other across a sudden resounding silence. No one even moved for a moment.

Dixon's cold eyes told him the man was not the least bit remorseful.

"Well, well. If it's not the mighty Captain," Dixon finally said, his tone both rude and mocking.

The defiant look in Dixon's eyes only incensed Sam more.

"You told my brother here some interesting things," he said.

"I'm glad you found it interesting," Dixon replied. "Personally, I think it's a rather unhappy story. But the ending is yet to be written."

"Just what do you mean by that?" William challenged.

Dixon stood and faced Sam. "I know my methods of trying to persuade you were, in retrospect, regrettable. Please accept my apologies for all three incidences."

The man's words came too easily, too smoothly. Sam struggled to suppress his anger. "Your man aiming a pistol at my face might be considered an incident. But I'd say kidnapping a child and abducting a woman are far more than an *incident.* Your crimes were despicable and serious offenses."

"All I can do is ask for your forgiveness. I had hoped that was why you came," Dixon said, "to accept my apology. I had told Sheriff Wyllie that I would apologize."

"I find that apology hard to believe or accept," William said.

"Why is that?" Dixon asked.

Sam answered. "Saying you apologize is not making an apology.

In any case, it is too little too late. What I want to know is why Mr. Forbes wanted me killed."

"I would never have killed you, Captain," Dixon said.

Sam didn't believe him for one instant. "Answer my question."

Dixon stiffened and then sat down again.

"Answer me, damn it," he swore, "or I'll have this cell unlocked and beat it out of you. Or maybe I'll have the sheriff put you in the pillory in the square. Then all the festival goers could throw insults and rotten eggs at you."

"You wouldn't dare," Dixon said.

"Get the key, William," Sam snarled.

"On my way," William said. "Do you want me to go get Bear too? He still wants to break Dixon's fingers." William's sense of humor never quit.

"No, I can break them myself. Get the key."

William turned to leave.

"No, wait, Sheriff Wyllie," Dixon said, standing again.

"Tell me!" Sam demanded. "Why did my wife's father want me killed?"

"Forbes said you married his daughter for her wealth and he didn't want you and your many brothers to steal her inheritance. He believes you took Catherine to Kentucky and married her against her will. He's convinced his genteel daughter would have done the respectable thing and returned to her parents when her husband was murdered."

"What about the letters my wife wrote explaining everything and telling her parents that she was exceedingly happy?" he asked.

Dixon shrugged. "Her mother, Mrs. Forbes, also believes that her proper daughter would never do anything as scandalous as going to Kentucky with strange men. She believes you forced her daughter to write the letters. Mr. Forbes agrees."

"That's absurd!" William said. "It would be laughable if it weren't

so outlandish."

Sam lowered his lids and let his glare drill into the man. "What else did he say?"

"He told me you were an uncouth, battle-weary, uneducated ruffian who had nothing but a horse to his name, and wore nothing but buckskins."

"Well, he had the buckskins part right anyway," William quipped.

Sam was in no mood for William's humor. Forbes' description of him struck too close to the truth. He had an excellent education, but he did only have one horse to his name when he met Catherine. And a mountain he thought worthless.

"Tell me about the gold found in my mountain," he said.

"With the right company to mine it for you, it could be worth a fortune," Dixon said. "If you want me to recommend one to you…"

"That won't be necessary," Sam interrupted. "Is there anything else you should tell me? I warn you, you will have only this one chance to tell me the truth. I cannot predict what sentence the District Court judge will hand down."

William eyed Sam. They both knew Dixon faced severe punishment that would likely include a brutal whipping, stiff fine, and branding his hand with a 'K' for kidnapper. When William took the job of sheriff of Boonesborough, he'd found a set of brands in his office, but his brother had yet to use them.

"Yes, there is something else," Dixon said. A look of despair spread over the man's face. He shrugged and lowered his head. "I know you won't believe me, but I am sorry for kidnapping your son. He's a good boy. I wish I had one like him. Now, I probably never will."

It was the first thing Dixon said that rang true. Sam almost pitied him. Almost. Pity was wasted on swine like Dixon. Sam noted that Dixon failed to apologize for anything else or promise to lead a more honorable life in the future.

He took a long hard look at Dixon. Here was a man facing the harsh realities of his poor choices in life. Choices that would curse him for a very long time, if not in this life, then in the next. Sam drew in a

sharp breath. “I do believe you,” he said, “but if I ever set eyes on you again or you come near anyone in my family, you’re a dead man. Remember that.”

Chapter 39

Bear and Artis wanted to stay at the ball until the wee hours celebrating her ride and William and Kelly wanted to make merry with them, so both couples decided to stay an extra day or two. Sam and Stephen wanted to leave early, but Bear and Artis would leave the following day and travel back with William and Kelly.

At the ball, Stephen gracefully tolerated all the celebrating he could endure and then retired early with Sam.

The next morning, as the gray sky heralded an approaching dawn, Sam left for home, accompanied by Stephen. They kept up a steady pace all day, but it still seemed to be taking forever.

Sam couldn't wait to get home to his sons and Catherine. His body yearned for her touch so intensely it nearly hurt. And his heart felt as if it would crack if he didn't get back to her soon. This was the first time they had been apart since they were married and he missed her more than he would have thought possible. He tried keeping her image in his mind, but it only made him miss her all the more. In truth, it made him crave the feel of her bare body in his embrace. And it made him want to breathe in the heavenly incense that was her unique scent.

They would be home soon enough, Sam told himself. He was actually relieved it was just he and Stephen making the trek home together. The two of them could make the journey far faster than a large group.

They stopped overnight at the same inn they'd stayed at on their way to Harrodsburg. After only a few hours' sleep, Sam woke, wide awake, and decided to wake Stephen. His brother grumbled a bit, but soon got dressed and they saddled the horses and were off again. Since it was still dark, they were riding slow enough to converse easily.

Sam glanced over at Stephen. "How does it feel to be riding a winning stallion?"

“I always thought he was a winner. Now, I’ve proven it,” Stephen answered.

“I always knew you were a winner too, Stephen. Now you’ve proven it. It took a great deal of courage and grit to win that race.”

Stephen cleared his throat. Although darkness hid his brother’s face, Sam could tell Stephen was too moved to speak.

After a few minutes, Stephen asked, “Who do you think cut Artis’ girth strap?”

“Probably the same fellow who kicked her foot out of the stirrup,” Sam said. “But it would be difficult to prove. I questioned the smithy, but he didn’t see anyone go into the stable. Whoever did it must have snuck in during the dead of night.”

“I don’t blame Bear for giving that bloody bastard a thorough beating. She might have been killed,” Stephen said.

“If she wasn’t such a good rider, she likely would have been.”

“She was tough to beat,” Stephen admitted. “I’m just happy I won, if only by a nose.”

“Things certainly seem to be going your way here in Kentucky. But are you happy living here?” Sam asked. “Or are you still seeing the horizon everywhere you look?”

“There are so many pines and cedar here, it’s hard to see a horizon.”

“I’m serious, Stephen,” Sam said. “I want to know. Do you think you’ll stay here the rest of your life?”

“There must be something wrong with me, Sam,” Stephen admitted. “I’m always wondering what’s down the road. What the rest of the country looks like.”

“Your heart hears the voice of adventure, that’s all,” Sam said, understanding.

“It seems nearly irresponsible, to me, to leave the exploration of this glorious wilderness to others.”

Stephen’s statement didn’t surprise Sam. It’s hard to cage an eagle. Stephen would always find civilization tiresome. “So you think

you might keep going west?"

"Maybe someday, but certainly not until my girls are older and married. Once they are, then I just might. That is, of course, if I can convince Jane again."

"Indeed," Sam agreed.

"She took a great deal of convincing the first time."

"I remember. But it wasn't the idea of going that made her hesitate. It was her worry for the girls' safety," Sam pointed out.

"That's why I would wait until they're married, if I leave at all. Things are going so well here, I may just decide to try to be content staying in one place."

Sam doubted Stephen would ever be able to do that. Even when he was a young boy, a bad case of wanderlust took hold of Stephen. "Remember when you convinced William to run away with you to search for treasure. You were just ten and William was about twelve."

"How could I forget? When we finally came back, only because we were hungry, father took me to the barn and took a switch to my backside. William got the less severe punishment of cleaning out the stalls for a month because I told Father it was my idea."

"As I recall, you couldn't sit down comfortably for a week," Sam said chuckling.

"No, but I never left without permission again."

Sam shook his head, remembering. "The ironic thing is that we were nearly sitting on a treasure the entire time. Who would have guessed that gold lay hidden right behind our farm in the mountain?"

"I'm sure the gold is buried well beyond the capabilities of a farmer and his boys. But it is ironic," Stephen agreed. "Do you ever get a yearning to explore the country?"

"No, I love it here and I'm staying. The minute I laid eyes on Cumberland Falls I felt at home—even *before* I learned that Catherine owned all the land around it for miles. The first morning I woke up there on our honeymoon, I knew I was finally where I belonged. I've found my home and I'm not going anywhere. Except maybe a short trip to Boston and then on to New Hampshire to see how much gold there actually is in Wiley Mountain."

"Why Boston?"

"To visit Catherine's parents. She's been wanting to show our babe to her mother, and I owe her father a visit. We need to have a long overdue conversation."

Sam filled Stephen in on everything Dixon told him and how he suspected her father wanted Sam killed because the man was after Catherine's fortune for himself.

"That's despicable," Stephen said. "Disturbing in every way."

"From what Catherine explained, he sounded like a despicable father even before all this. He forced her to marry her first husband because of his wealth and position in society. He didn't care one bit that she didn't love him. When her husband was killed by those thieves, she was actually afraid to go back to Boston. Terrified that her father would force her to marry another man she didn't love."

"A loveless marriage was sad for her, but arranged matrimonies among the privileged of society are not that uncommon," Stephen said.

"True, but that doesn't make it right. How could a man do that to his daughter? Can you imagine forcing Martha or Polly to marry someone simply because of their wealth or influence?"

"No, of course not," Stephen said. "I love my daughters and wouldn't want them to be miserable, no matter how much money a man had."

"I'm not looking forward to meeting the man," Sam told him.

"Then don't go."

"I have to. This needs to be settled. If I don't go, Forbes is likely to send another man like Dixon or worse. And I don't want Catherine to be estranged from her family, especially her mother. She misses her. I'm certainly not looking forward to telling Catherine all of this."

"Just tell her the part about her father thinking *you* were after her fortune, not that he wanted you dead."

"No, I want our relationship to be based on honesty. She deserves to know the whole truth—that her father wants her money and was willing to do anything to get it, including killing me."

“How will you keep your hands off the man?” Stephen asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll be tempted to beat the hell out of him, but you can’t hurt him—he’s her father after all. And he’s rich and powerful. That makes him capable of having you jailed or worse.”

“I don’t plan to hurt him. But I want him to know what kind of man I really am. And that I didn’t marry Catherine for her fortune. God as my witness, I didn’t even know she had one.”

“Catherine could easily tell him that,” Stephen said. “But he may not believe her.”

“Granted,” Sam agreed, “that’s one reason she needs to know the whole truth. Or at least what I think is the truth. Who knows how much of what Dixon said is true. It could all be a pack of lies.”

“Agreed, but that’s not likely. He has nothing to gain by lying,” Stephen pointed out.

“True, but who knows how a man like that thinks. Dixon’s ethics and reasoning are all over the place.”

“I don’t envy you. It will be a long hard trip to the east coast,” Stephen said. “And at the end of it, you face an unpleasant task.”

“I’ve been thinking we would take a keel boat up the Ohio instead of going through Cumberland Gap. It would shorten the trip and be easier for the children to travel that way. At the stopping off point, I can hire a carriage and driver to take us on to Boston.”

“When do you think you might go?” Stephen asked.

“Early summer. And we’d return in the fall,” Sam answered. “Unless Catherine decides she wants to cross the Atlantic and visit her English estate.”

“I can look after your horse farm,” Stephen volunteered.

“Excellent idea. If you could spend a week there each month, that should be sufficient.”

“I could hire a hand to watch my place and feed my stock while I alternate weeks between your farm and mine. I have a promising young man working at my place while I’ve been gone. I told him it

was a temporary position, but with my winnings, I could make it permanent."

"Sounds like a plan," Sam said, relieved that Stephen would be able to help.

"It would give me a chance to breed George to some of your mares. More importantly, it will give me way to repay you and Catherine for all you've done for my family."

"I would be grateful for your help," Sam said. "I hate to leave. But this has to be done."

"You'll be able to see Edward again," Stephen pointed out. "I miss him. I still wish he'd come with us, but I understand why he felt he had to stay in New Hampshire."

"I miss our brother as well," Sam said. "No, he couldn't leave. His general store was too prosperous to give up. And he wasn't suited to life in the wilderness."

"Maybe he'll be able to help you with the gold mine."

"I thought the same thing," Sam said. "He has such a good mind for business. Have you heard from Edward lately?"

"No, it's been some time since I've received a letter. Have you heard from him?"

"No," Sam answered. "It's somewhat strange. He's normally very good about writing regularly. I'll write to him tomorrow. I'll have one of my men take my letter to Fort Logan."

"After our large brood staying with you and Catherine for so long, I'm sure you need to restock supplies anyway," Stephen said.

"Indeed. Stephen, don't mention any of this to Jane until you're on your way home. I want to be sure Catherine knows first."

"Certainly. And don't worry, Catherine is strong enough to handle all of it. And so are you, big brother."

"The sun's rising," Sam said, pointing to the brilliant crimson spot sneaking up on the horizon and peeking between the trees. Stephen was right, it was more difficult to see the horizon here. "We can travel faster now. Let's go show your wife and girls your handsome medal."

“What I really want to show her is the pouch of coins,” Stephen said.

“I can understand that.”

Smiling, Sam nudged Alex into a faster trot. He would be home in a few hours. And then he would to keep Catherine in his arms for a few more hours.

Epilogue

Sam opened the door and, at once, his heart swelled within his chest at the sight of Catherine.

She stood by the hearth, alone, her hand resting on the mantel, staring into the flames. Her gleaming black hair fell forward as she whirled around at the sound of the door opening. Her blue eyes lit with surprise and her rose lips broadened into a brilliant smile when she caught sight of him.

He fairly ran into her outstretched arms and drew her tightly against his chest. Without a babe between them, he could finally press her luscious body against his. He buried his face in her hair for a moment, relishing her soft scent and the feel of her in his arms. His mouth hungrily covered hers. Her tongue, a delicious sensation, sent shivers of desire racing down his spine. Before his desire could travel further, he pulled away, and just gazed upon her upturned face. The sight of it warmed him so.

"Sam, I missed you," Catherine breathed.

"You have no idea how much I missed you. I may never leave again," he said. "How's Rory?"

"He's fine. Sleeping right now. He's hard to keep full, but otherwise he's the best baby. He hardly cries as all. Doc says he's going to be at least as tall as you based on how fast he's growing."

Sam smiled, kissed her again, and renewed his embrace.

"Where are the others?" she asked, leaning against his chest.

"Stephen is taking the horses to the barn. He'll be here in a minute. Everyone else is coming back tomorrow."

"How did the race go? Your men wouldn't say. Garvin just said Stephen would tell us."

"Stephen will tell you," Sam answered. "Where are Jane and the

children?"

"All upstairs, still playing with the puppies. Those dogs are already spoiled. Miss Henk just took the children a plate of warm cookies."

"Sounds like someone is spoiling the children too. Call them all down, will you, while I take off my coat and gear," Sam told her. "I want them to be here when Stephen comes in. Call Rory and Mrs. Wrigley in too. I assume they are both still in the kitchen?"

Catherine grinned at his implication. "You assume correctly. I think they just came in from the smokehouse with a nice ham for tonight. It took them a while to pick one out," she said, giggling a little.

Catherine called everyone down and Sam was still removing his weapons when Stephen came in carrying their bags.

Stephen set their bags against the wall and hung his coat and weapons too.

Mrs. Wrigley and Rory hurried into the room, happy to see Sam and Stephen.

"Hello Catherine, Rory, Mrs. Wrigley," Stephen said.

"Welcome back, Stephen," Catherine told him. "Everyone's on their way down now."

Rory asked where Kelly, William, Bear, and Artis were. Sam told him they would arrive tomorrow and Rory appeared relieved.

The rumble of hurried footsteps on the back stairs heralded the arrival of the others.

Little John stormed in first. "Pa! Uncle Stephen!" he shouted as he ran to Sam.

Sam grabbed ahold of his son and lifted him into his arms as Martha and Polly ran toward Stephen, followed by Jane who carried baby Samuel. Stephen kissed all four of them.

"Did you bring me a present?" Little John asked straight away.

"A present? Christmas is over. Besides you don't like presents anyway," Sam teased.

“Yes, I do!” Little John protested.

Everyone laughed.

“Well I brought something,” Stephen said. He pulled out his blue-ribboned medal, a huge smile lighting up his joyful face.

“You won!” Jane cried and hugged him fiercely. “I knew you would.”

Martha and Polly were hugging him too, one on each leg.

Miss Henk brought Nicole, who carried her new doll, into the room. The darling girl smiled charmingly and babbled something about the doll when Rory told her that her parents would be back tomorrow.

Sam was anxious to see Rory but he wanted to share Stephen’s happiness first, before he saw his new son.

Everyone congratulated Stephen for a few minutes and Sam told them how well Stephen and George raced. “It was the most exciting race I’ve ever witnessed,” he concluded.

“Feel this,” Stephen told Jane, handing her the coin pouch. “Now I can expand our herd and make an exceedingly good living for us.”

“I’m happy for you, husband,” Jane said and hugged Stephen’s waist.

Mrs. Wrigley, Rory, and Miss Henk nodded their agreement.

Was it Sam’s imagination or did Mrs. Wrigley look younger?

“Actually, I did get you a present,” Sam said, “one you can all share.” He put Little John down, reached into his travel bag, and drew out a sack of assorted hard candies.

“Candy! Yeah!” Little John said. “I promise to share. Do puppies like candy?” he asked looking up at Sam.

“No! No candy for the puppies,” Catherine answered quickly. “Just children, and Miss Henk if she wants one.”

Sam placed a hand on Little John’s shoulder. “If it’s all right with you, I’d like to see your brother now and take a bath and then maybe rest up a little before supper. We set off well before dawn this

morning."

"All right, Pa," Little John said. "We'll go play with the puppies again. We were teaching them to fetch. When you're through resting, you can play with them too."

"That's a promise," Sam said. "I'll come upstairs just as soon as I wake up."

"I'll try to keep this brood quiet so you can rest," Miss Henk said, still holding Nicole's little hand. "Come along children."

Martha took her brother Samuel by the hand and the children all went upstairs with Miss Henk.

As they climbed the stairs, Sam could hear Little John describing the rainbow of colors in the candy sack to the girls.

"Will you come with me to see Rory?" he asked Catherine.

"Indeed, and I could use a nap myself," she answered with a subtle wink at Sam.

"I've already got some water warming in our big wash tub, Mr. Wyllie. We'll use it for your bath instead," Mrs. Wrigley said. "Then I'll warm some more for you, Mr. Stephen."

"I'll help you carry it," Rory volunteered.

"I'll help too," Stephen said.

Sam's desire for Catherine began to smolder as soon as he followed her into the bedroom. He couldn't wait to bathe and then taste his wife's sweetness. If she was ready.

After they entered the bedroom, he hurried to the cradle. Rory slumbered peacefully. "I think he has grown!" he whispered. "How long do you think he will nap?"

"He just fed him and put him down to sleep, so I'd say at least another hour or two," she answered, smiling playfully. "Time enough for us to *rest*."

"Are you certain you're completely healed up?" he asked, keeping his voice soft. He desperately hoped she was.

"Indeed. I heal fast. I need only one thing now to help me feel

completely back to normal."

He didn't have to guess what that was.

Rory and Mrs. Wrigley knocked softly and then each brought in two buckets full of steaming water. Stephen followed with two more.

"Enjoy your bath, big brother," Stephen said as he left with his buckets.

"I brought a fresh bar of soap and some clean towels into your room earlier," Mrs. Wrigley said as she pulled the drapes closed. "They're in the dresser."

The woman thinks of everything, Sam thought. It made him doubly glad he'd given her a generous Christmas bonus.

"Will you be needing anything else?" Mrs. Wrigley asked.

"Just some quiet time to rest," Catherine answered. "Thank you both for bringing the water." After the two left, Catherine locked the door behind them.

It wasn't long before Sam relaxed in the warm tub, enjoying the feel of the hot water on his saddle sore muscles. Catherine took the bar of soap and a wash rag and scrubbed his back, neck, and hair. He closed his eyes, relishing the feel of her hands gliding over his soapy skin and scalp. "You know," he said, "I think I'll have the cooper at Fort Logan make us a tub big enough for two."

"What a splendid idea," Catherine declared. "I think I would enjoy taking a bath with you."

"I guarantee it," Sam said, laying a wash cloth over the evidence of his desire.

Catherine's eyes widened when the cloth started to rise from the water. "I think it's time to dry you off, Sir."

Sam stood up so fast he splashed water on her and the floor and he teetered, in danger of falling for a moment. They were both laughing as he willingly let her help him dry off, all the while, enjoying watching her blush. He could tell she was making an effort to avert her eyes, but she kept peeking downward, causing her blush to spread to her neck and chest.

"You are entirely too well-dressed for a nap," he said. "I would

suggest that you take off that lovely gown and…" He had to stop speaking when she reached under her skirt and, with a bit of flair, stripped off a lacy white petticoat.

"And?" she asked seductively, swiping the frilly lace across his legs before she tossed it aside. Then she slipped her hands under her gown again and removed her garters and hose from her shapely long legs.

His mouth hung open. His tongue was almost certainly hanging down too. When he could make both work again, he said, "…and meet me under the covers."

"First, help me unbutton my dress and unlace my stays," she whispered, her voice hoarse with desire.

He did and slid the beautiful gold gown off her soft ivory shoulders and down her slender arms.

Then he watched, his hunger for her growing with each second, as she removed all but a silky rose-colored chemise with an exceptionally low-cut bodice that was quite provocative. He admired the rounded swells of her breasts through the sheer fabric. Had she guessed that he would return home today?

"You're so gorgeous," he whispered.

She slipped into the bed and Sam climbed in and crushed her to him. He sprinkled kisses along her jaw and around her lips. "I…love… you," he said between each kiss. Then he fully captured her mouth. He drank in the sweetness of her kiss. He feasted on the feel of her body against his once again.

She moved her hands up and down his back. The gentle massage sent shivers of longing surging through him, but his desire nearly exploded when she ran her tongue along his neck and her ragged breaths floated against his ear.

Then her fingertips pushed against his back, bringing his chest against her satin-smooth breasts. The intimate feel of them rubbing against him made blood pound in his brain and his own breasts tingle from the contact. He could feel her heart thudding against his own.

His passion grew stronger and every inch of him craved her. His need for her became nearly uncontrollable. He wouldn't be able to make this last as long as he wanted. Normally, he liked to explore

every part of her before their lovemaking moved forward. He would enjoy doing just that later tonight.

His hand moved under her silky chemise to skim across her hips and bottom. Then his fingertips lightly explored her inner thighs until she quivered beneath his hand. Kissing her neck, he moved his hand up, and gently outlined the circle of her breast.

It was time to remove the chemise. As lovely and erotic as it was, he wanted no barriers between them. They needed to be flesh against flesh. Man against woman. Husband against wife.

He helped her out of the delicate garment and then eased her back down, splaying her long thick locks against the pillows. Before he covered them both with the sheet again, he let his eyes feast on her soft creamy body. Already, she appeared to be nearly back to her normal voluptuous form. Although her waist was somewhat larger, it was still small and the little extra curve on her hips only added to her exquisite beauty.

He had no doubt she was one of God's most glorious creations. He returned his eyes to her lovely face. Her features conveyed both delicacy and strength. Her long lashes fluttered against her cheekbones and her rosy full lips seemed to beg for his kiss. "You are so amazingly beautiful," he whispered.

"Thank you for saying so. And you're magnificent, my husband."

He pulled the sheet over them and she sank into his embrace. His arms enveloped her, and his hand explored the hollows of her back as he kissed her deeply.

A delightful shiver of wanting ran through him, but he needed to make her feel the glories of her womanhood before he would allow himself to join with her.

She squirmed beneath his rhythmic touch and tugged him even closer, her soft curves molding to the contours of his body. She buried her hands in his hair and her mouth covered his hungrily.

The taste of her mouth seemed a particularly heady sensation that left his own mouth burning. He kissed her back with a wild intensity and he felt her body quiver again beside him.

As her fervor heightened, he could feel her uneven breathing against his shoulder and the heat of her trembling limbs.

When she clung to him, muffling her cries of pleasure against his shoulder, he reminded himself to be gentle and easy. He didn't want to hurt her or make her uncomfortable.

As their bodies linked in exquisite harmony, she breathed in deep lungfuls of air. He felt love flow within her like warm honey and he couldn't keep from moaning aloud with delight. Yet, he was careful not to yield to the full fury of his passion. He continued to love her gently, remaining sensitive to her recently healed body. Yet, her ardor was surprisingly unrestrained. It was also touchingly tender at the same time. She seemed to sense how much he needed her—how much he'd missed their coupling.

He paused to kiss her again and then whispered, "I love you," as she said it to him at the same time.



Later that evening, Sam played with Little John, the other children, and two frisky puppies for some time. Afterwards, he sat in his chair in front of the hearth thinking through how he would tell Catherine about her father. There just wasn't a way to make what he had to say any easier. He needed to just tell her. It was time to find Catherine.

He found her humming a soothing cradlesong as she put Rory down for a nap. When she finished, he took her to the small space at the back of the house that he used for an office.

He liked the cozy room that smelled of his tobacco and the pipe he still smoked there occasionally. The medal George Washington awarded him was displayed on one wall and the fine-looking hide of a mountain lion hung on the other wall. Preferring to be outdoors, he normally only spent enough time in his office to keep up with the books for the farm. Although sometimes, he would use the quiet room for reading as well. A pine bookcase that he had built held some of his favorite books, including one by Daniel Boone. It was the only place the two of them would be guaranteed complete privacy and quiet.

He shut the door and motioned for her to take a seat.

"What is it, Sam? You have me worried," she said.

"Unfortunately, this will probably worry you a lot more." He filled her in on the conversations that first William and then he had with Dixon. He spared no details, wanting her to have the full picture.

She listened attentively and quietly, her face never registering emotion or alarm.

When he was through, he paused and asked, “Are you all right?”

“Sam, I dealt with my father for many many years. I’m fine.”

“I have no idea how much of what Dixon says is true.”

“None of this comes as a surprise to me,” she said, “in fact, I’m sorry to say, it sounds typical of him.”

Sam felt a twinge of relief. At least she wasn’t shocked. But he could hear what sounded like a permanent sorrow in her voice.

“I want to go see him,” he said. “I want him to know what kind of man I am. I want your mother to know the letters you wrote were your own words. I also want him to know I will never allow him take what’s rightfully yours.”

Catherine steepled her hands and rubbed her chin against her fingers, thinking. After a moment, she settled back in her chair. “Sam, as you know, when my husband was killed, I was afraid to go back to Boston. That’s why I came to Kentucky with your family. The thought of going back home terrified me because I feared my dominating father. A child should never have to fear a parent, but I did.”

She took a deep breath and continued. “Because of you, I am no longer afraid. I’m married now, with a child of my own. Perhaps it’s time for me to face up to him. To let him know that I have a life and it’s entirely mine—not his. And my fortune, here and in England, is entirely ours—yours and mine—not his.” She paused and then continued, her voice calm and determined. “I would be willing to help him financially, if he asked. But I will not allow him to simply take.”

“Nor should you,” Sam agreed.

Catherine straightened her back. “You and I can let him know what kind of man you really are, if that’s important to you. But what’s important to me is that I *know* what kind of man you are. When we met, you didn’t have a lot of wealth to your name because you spent most of your young life serving your country and then your family. But you are rich in so many other, far more important, ways. Your mental and physical strength, your integrity, your principles, that’s what makes me love you so. I also love your intelligence, your ability to lead men, and your love of family, as evidenced by your willingness

to take care of Little John when his father died. Those are the kinds of things that make you who you are, Sam. My father has wealth and power, but he lacks everything you have."

Sam's gaze clouded with moisture. Her words touched his very soul. He swallowed his emotions and grasped her hand. "I don't deserve you."

She looked back at him, eyes intense and gleaming. "Don't you ever say that again! You deserve me, Little John, Rory, this wonderful home and stunning land. You are blessed so richly because you gave so much of yourself for others for so long. And you still do. You are an amazing husband. You way you love me, and my body, is astonishing —sometimes I think no other woman in the world has ever been loved this well. The way you're protective without being overly protective. The way you listen to not just what I think, but what other women think as well. I don't give a flip what my father thinks, and I look forward to telling him all that and more. It's past time he learned what a husband is actually supposed to be like. I feel sorry for my mother because she's never known the kind of love I know. You've given me the most precious thing a woman could ever receive—true forever love."

Astounded at the depth and passion of her feelings, Sam couldn't speak. So he stood and hauled her into his embrace. He wanted to tell her so much, just as eloquently as she had spoken to him. He knew of only one way to do that. He placed a hand behind her head, and spoke with his heart.

When he reluctantly pulled his lips from hers, he let them linger against her mouth for a moment, treasuring the tender affection they just shared.

She laid her head against his chest and locked her arms around his waist. "Sam, you're my hero. And always will be."

He wanted to say something, but he decided he wouldn't, not yet. Because what flashed through his mind was what he wanted his last words on earth to be. He would tell Catherine, *you gave me the gift of love*.

With their lives so richly blessed and a world of possibilities ahead of them, he would instead focus on the future and his growing family. It was not only a new year, it was a new century, on a new frontier, in a new country.

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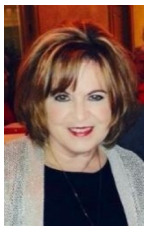
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About the Author



Amazon best-selling novelist Dorothy Wiley is the author of five books, including her highly acclaimed debut novel *Wilderness Trail of Love*, the first in her American Wilderness Series Romances.

Called a "deft new writer of intelligent romantic fiction," Wiley enjoys writing action-packed romantic adventures set in the late 18th-century American wilderness. Her books celebrate the rich historical heritage of the frontier and the courageous settlers who shaped America.

Like Wiley's compelling heroes, who from the onset make it clear they will not fail despite the adversities they face, this author is likewise destined for success. In 2014 and 2015, her novels won five awards, notably an Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award Quarter-finalist, a Readers' Favorite Gold Medal, and a Historical Novel Society Editor's Choice. Her books continue to earn five-star ratings from readers and high praise from reviewers.

The daughter of a talented artist, Wiley inherited her father's creativity. Raised in southern California, she attended college at The University of Texas in Austin, Texas. She graduated with honors, receiving a bachelor of journalism, and grew to dearly love both Texas and a 7th generation Texan, her husband Larry Wiley. Her husband's courageous ancestors, very early pioneers of Kentucky, Louisiana, and Texas, provided the inspiration for her novels.

After a distinguished career in corporate marketing and public relations, she is living her dream—writing historical romances. On their ranch in central Texas, Wiley is currently at work on a new book.

Follow Dorothy Wiley on Amazon www.amazon.com/author/dorothywiley.

To see trailers for each of her books, enter Dorothy Wiley in YouTube's search box or go to https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCE7DLH6XkByxWPJewaud45Q

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She would enjoy connecting with you through social media at:

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Acknowledgments

Although this is a fictionalized story, the heroic stories of America's pioneers must be remembered! By remembering, we express our gratitude for their sacrifices. We owe our country to America's daring and brave first-wave pioneers. Their hard fought struggles for a place in the vast wilderness gave us the majestic country we enjoy today.

One of the most difficult trials for pioneer women was childbirth. Many things could go wrong. My own son was breech and I experienced the same pain that Catherine describes—his head pressing against my right ribs. Fortunately, after a Caesarian, my beautiful baby was delivered safely. Today, some physicians will attempt to reposition a breech baby by manipulating the mother's abdomen. There are several videos on YouTube that describe this procedure. So, not only was it possible in Catherine's time, it could have been a life-saving option. Caesarian deliveries did occur during those times, though rarely and typically only to save the baby's life.

I would like to thank my patient husband (also my muse) and my dear talented sister for their help in polishing and formatting this manuscript. I love you both so much and thank you for your continued faith in me. And my thanks to my fellow author and friend Deborah Gafford, a wonderful writer, for her suggestions and support. If you get a chance, check out her books at www.amazon.com/author/deborahgafford. Also, my thanks to designer Erin Dameron-Hill, the artist who created the stunning covers for all five of my novels.

And finally, and very importantly, a huge thank you to all my loyal readers. I am so grateful for each and every one of you. I especially want to thank those of you who took the time to write such kind reviews on Amazon. They truly inspire me! And your reviews help other readers find and enjoy my books. Your ratings and reviews, no matter whether they are just a couple of words or several paragraphs, are enormously appreciated.

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